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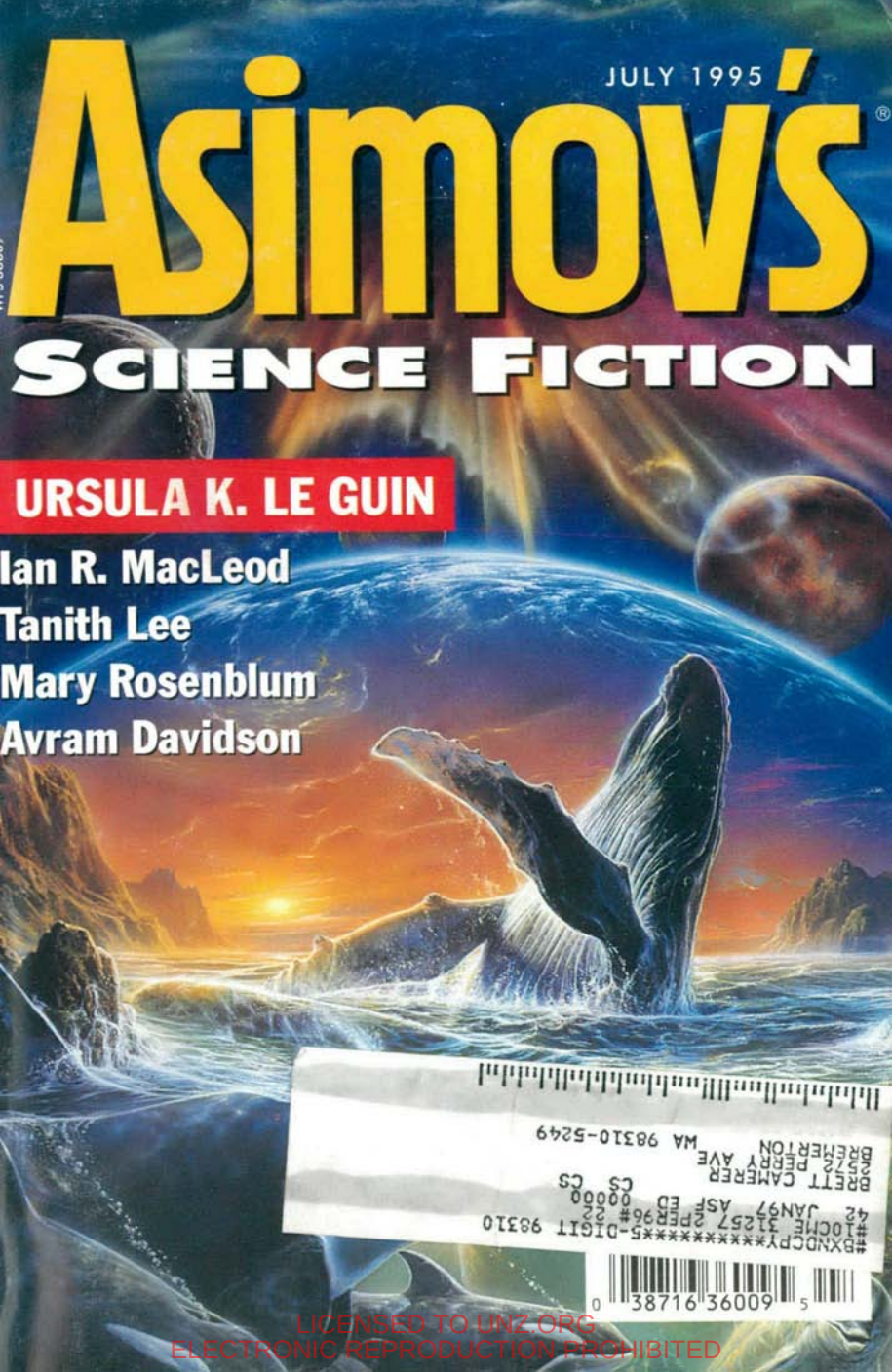

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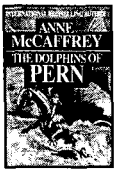

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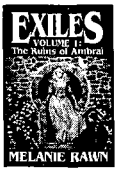

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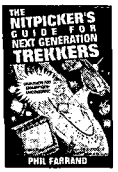

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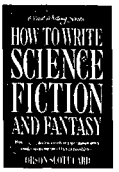

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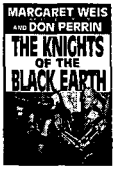

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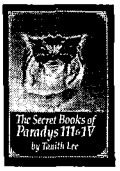

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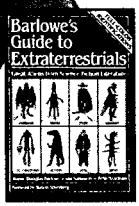

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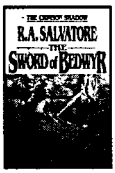

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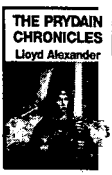

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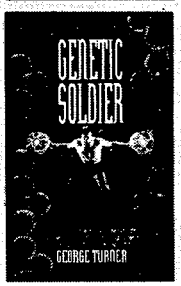

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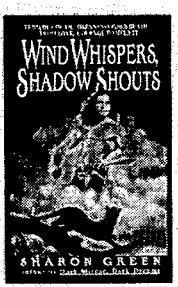

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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

CONTEST

Yes, a contest, and *you* can be a winner. And I'm not talking about the Asimov Award—more formally, the Isaac Asimov Award for Undergraduate Excellence in Science Fiction and Fantasy—which brings a $500 prize each year to some talented collegian for a previously unpublished story. Rick Wilber, Gardner Dozois, and Sheila Williams are the people in charge of that one, Eric Choi of the University of Toronto won it last year for his story "Dedication," and the winner of this year's competition will be announced in a couple of months. But the Asimov Award is limited to full-time undergraduate students at accredited universities and colleges. I'm talking about a more general contest for new writers, one that has been going on in the science-fiction field for more than fifty years.

The gaudy old pulp magazine *Thrilling Wonder Stories* was, so far as I know, the first science fiction magazine to provide a special award for work by amateur writers. "CAN YOU WRITE A STORY?" was the headline in the October 1938 issue. "*Thrilling Wonder Stories* is looking for new writers. We want stories from readers who have never written a word for professional publication. And we will pay the same rates for these stories as we do for all our professional writers! It doesn't matter who you are—your story will get the same reception that is accorded to our most famous writers."

Then as now, the readers of science fiction have yearned to become writers of science fiction. (I know: I made the transition from fan to pro myself, circa 1953.) *Thrilling Wonder Stories* was immediately deluged with manuscripts by beginners; and the June 1939 issue produced the first contest winner, "The Broken Axiom" by twenty-five-year-old Alfred Bester. The editors noted "the excellent technique and style employed by its author," and praised him for having "the knack of developing an interesting story that carries you breathlessly through its incidents and comes to a natural climax."

"The Broken Axiom" was, in fact, something less than a masterpiece. But young Alfie Bester certainly did have the knack of carrying you breathlessly through an interest-

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ing story, as we found out a decade and a half later when he uncorked such classic novels as *The Demolished Man* and *The Stars My Destination,* along with a couple of dozen astonishing short stories, in the course of a career that would carry him to the Science Fiction Writers of America's Grand Master award.

Which is more than can be said for the other winners of the *Thrilling Wonder* contest—such folk as Leo Sonderegger, Nicholas E. Kenealy, Charles F. Ksanda, Bill Brudy, and Graph Waldeyer. Waldeyer and Ksanda eventually had a few more short stories published, but only Bester, of the group of prizewinners, went on to any sort of significant SF writing career.

The idea of running a contest for amateurs had also been suggested, about the same time, to John W. Campbell, Jr., the dynamic new editor of the leading magazine of the field, *Astounding Science Fiction.* And indeed Campbell did announce such a contest, more or less, in his July 1938 issue. But John Campbell was never content to do anything the ordinary way, and *his* contest for beginners had a characteristically Campbellian spin on it.

"CONTEST," was the heading on his editorial, just as it is on mine this month. The piece seemed to be offering prizes in a competition open only to amateur SF writers, at least down to the middle of the page, when Campbell suddenly noted that "the winning manu-

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scripts, to be winners, must be as good as any professional's work, whether an amateur or professional does it. Since every manuscript must compete with the winner, then, it makes no real difference whether it be 'open' or not." Therefore any writer, previously published or not, would be free to enter Campbell's "contest." "Judges? The editors usually get that job. The readers will determine whether a given contestant appears again."

In other words, the only contest would be a Darwinian one. Campbell's pages were perpetually open to any writer, professional or amateur, who could write a story good enough for John Campbell to publish. As Campbell put it:

"Now that is shaping up remarkably like a contest we have run —run for a considerable time. Every month we hold that contest, judging several hundred amateur and professional submissions. We pay those prizes to the winners . . . Not just one winner but several. Further, there is neither opening nor closing date; there is no limit to the number of submissions one entrant can make, and no waiting for months while the judging takes place. It is, in fact, our regular buying practice. . . .

"The contest is on—and goes on."

Among those who read those words was a former U.S. Navy officer named Robert A. Heinlein, thirty-one years old, who was thinking of trying his hand as a science fiction writer. Heinlein had just written his first story, a seven-thousand-worder called "Lifeline." After comparing the terms of the *Thrilling Wonder Stories* contest and those that John Campbell was offering for his, he decided that the options looked better for him over at *Astounding,* and he sent his story there. Bingo! Campbell bought it for seventy dollars and ran it in the August 1939 issue. A winner, all right.

Campbell's open "contest" for new writers turned up a fancy run of winners all that year, as a matter of fact. A month before Heinlein, new author A. E. van Vogt made his awesome debut with "Black Destroyer," and a new kid named Asimov had a story in the same issue, "Trends." The August issue featured not only Heinlein but future Grand Masters Lester del Rey and L. Sprague de Camp. Theodore Sturgeon arrived in September. Leigh Brackett followed a couple of months later. Some contest! Some winners!

And so it has gone in our genre, every year since. There is no other field of fiction, I think, where new talent is so assidu after and cultivated And though there h sional one-shot cont teurs, along the lin that *Thrilling Wond* half a century ago, of discovery has be day-out search tha duct as they rumma influx of manuscri knowns. There is ve more satisfying to a

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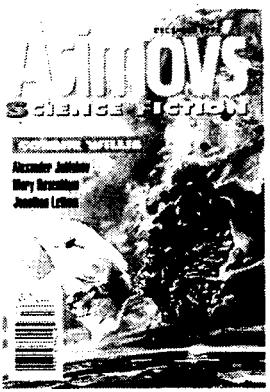

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the thrill of finding a story by someone destined to go on to wonderful things. (I have had that thrill myself, now and then, in my own occasional editorial capacity. Well do I remember, for example, the excitement of coming across a messy but irresistible manuscript, a quarter of a century ago, by a writer with the unfamiliar name of Gardner Dozois. . . .)

Once the editors have done their work of discovery, the readers are quick to applaud the newcomers' achievements. Every year at the World Science Fiction Convention an award is presented to the outstanding new writer of the moment. In the beginning, the award was included among the Hugo trophies that are given to writers, editors, artists, and fans for meritorious performance. The Best New Writer Hugo was awarded only three times, most recently in 1958, to Brian Aldiss. (The previous two winners were Philip José Farmer, in 1953, and—ahem—Robert Silverberg, in 1956. Not a bad bunch of choices, if I do say so myself.) Then it lapsed for a time, which is why such people as Ursula K. Le Guin, Larry Niven, Roger Zelazny, and James Tiptree, Jr., had to do without it. But they managed to get some attention in other ways.

In the early 1970s the Best New Writer trophy was revived under the new and more appropriate name of the John W. Campbell Award, and it has become an annual event. The list of the winners is a remarkable measure not only of the regularity with which gifted new writers come striding into the

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science fiction arena but of the accuracy with which the voters (you, the readers) have been able to discern their talent.

Jerry Pournelle was the first Campbell Award winner, in 1973. As I look down the list of those who followed him, the names of C. J. Cherryh, Orson Scott Card, Stephen Donaldson, and Lucius Shephard stand out immediately. It may be hard to believe now, but they were raw beginners, once, their promise observed and recognized almost immediately. Here is Tom Reamy, the brilliant author of "San Diego Lightfoot Sue," dead much too soon. Spider Robinson . . . Barry Longyear . . . Karen Joy Fowler. Kristine Kathryn Rusch, the 1990 winner, has defected to the camp of the editors, now, and is discovering her own future Campbell Award nominees over at *Fantasy & Science Fiction,* for which she received a Hugo of her own last year. Quite a list. The most recent name to go on it is that of Amy Thomson, author of the well-received novel *Virtual Girl.* Are Hugos and Nebulas waiting in her future? Time will tell.

So—as John Campbell said fifty-seven years ago—"The contest is on—and goes on." You don't have to be a full-time undergraduate student at an accredited university or college to enter this one. You don't have to be a member of any special group at all, except the group of people capable of writing a story worth publishing—and you can't find out whether you are unless you send in your work to be judged.

Somewhere out there in the readership of this magazine are the Heinleins and Asimovs and Cards and Cherryhs and Amy Thomsons of tomorrow. Editor Dozois is waiting to hear from them. And so are all the rest of us. ●

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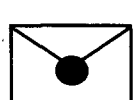

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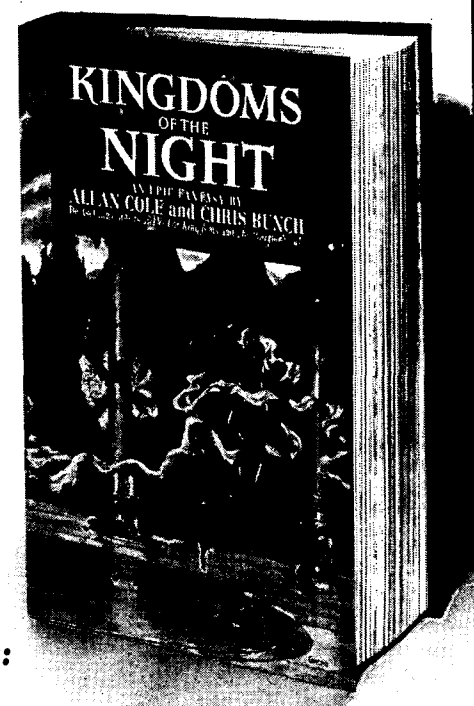

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LETTERS

Dear Mr. Dozois:

As a long time reader of *Asimov's,* I have come to expect the finest in science fiction. I am seldom disappointed. I have been moved. I have been touched. I have laughed. I have been thrilled by the wonder. I am amazed by the imagination and science. As a would-be writer (who would rather read), I am often quite envious.

Rarely, however, have I ever read a story with the power and marvel of "Death and the Librarian" by Esther M. Friesner. A truly remarkable story. One is immediately reminded of "The Devil and Daniel Webster," but this story reaches deeper into the emotions. I am in awe of Ms. Friesner's ability to construct and write such a beautiful tale.

Of the many fine stories published this year, please place my vote for this one as the Best of the Best.

Bill Harrington

Dear Eds,

Esther Friesner's "Death and the Librarian" is a masterpiece! It reminded me of Bradbury's "October Country," but its use of the shapechanger is very modern. Best story in your Dec. issue *by a mile.*

Stan Fink
Philadelphia, PA

Dear Gardner Dozois:

As a blind person, I want to express my absolute delight in Joe Haldeman's story "None so Blind." It is the first science fiction story I've read which dealt with a blind person in a knowing and natural way. (I read it in braille, incidentally.)

I laughed with recognition at the description of Amy's sight-reading—I've done it so many times. (Unfortunately, I don't have her ear or abilities.)

I have always felt that science fiction writers have dealt with blindness and blind characters unrealistically, and they therefore have not been real characters.

Thanks for publishing this TERRIFIC story.

Sincerely yours,

Wanda Lavon
Portland, OR

DEDICATED
TO THE MEMORY OF
"SPARK" MATSUNAGA
U.S. SENATOR FOR HAWAII
and to
THE FIRST MARTIANS—
TODAY'S STUDENTS OF THE
INTERNATIONAL SPACE
UNIVERSITY

Dear Gardner,

Just read "Dedication"—delighted to see an ISU professor on

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Mars—see above Dedication (sic!) from *The Snow of Olympus,* out next month from Gollancz.
All best,

Arthur C. Clark
Chancellor, I.S.U.
Colombo, Sri Lanka

(P.S. Ask Rudy & Bruce what happened to the energy released when the "Jellys" made Helium! Would have made an H-bomb look feeble.)

Dear Editor:

I was (and please imagine me searching carefully for words here), most interested by Mr. Silverberg's editorial on the caning of Michael Fay. I myself (being a fan of modest means and having spared the navy my dubious help), have never been to Singapore. I must therefore bow to Mr. Silverberg's expertise on the subject of that people's culture and society. Perhaps he could clear up a point that seemed to me, at least, to have been left hanging?

Now, as Mr. Silverberg himself pointed out in his editorial, Singaporean culture is somewhat different from American. No doubt the social paradigms of any Asian land's are not entirely reflected by those in your country (or even Canada's). For instance, there are quite a few more workers in Japan who, in the course of their employment, work themselves to death than the U.S.A. can boast of. This is hardly surprising since Nipponese culture stresses loyalty to one's master (among other things), whereas in The Land Of The Free it is shameful to even admit to having a master, no less to being one. The Boss may have a claim on your time, but Heaven forbid that anyone should own you!

To come to my point (at last), corporal punishment is considered quite acceptable among Singapore's citizens. In fact, judging by crime statistics from that land, it is an effective deterrent to crime. (Again, this is all according to Mr. Silverberg.) Now Singapore is not America, obviously, but here I must bow to the greater experience of the editorialist, my senior. I wonder, then, if Mr. Silverberg, with his great knowledge of these things, believes that caning would deter crime as effectively amongst U.S. criminals as it does with miscreants in Singapore? Or would it perhaps merely harden the resolve of an American malefactor to continue to rebel? I ask this, out of ignorance, merely to clarify Mr. Silverberg's opinion. He implied that, since corporal punishment works in Singapore, it must also work in America (which doesn't necessarily follow) but neither made the claim outright nor proved it.

Another point that I feel warrants exploration is Mr. Silverberg's own confession of personal experience with vandalism. I can well understand his anger. Having been the victim of bullies all through my academic career, there are people whom I could be permitted to cane the skin off of and I still would not consider their debt paid. In a calmer moment, however, Mr. Silverberg might agree that caning would neither prevent his car from being violated again, nor stop the vandals who did it from repeating their offense. If so, then surely reason would

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force him to conclude that caning, while emotionally satisfying to the victim of the crime, would not be a good idea after all.

On a (literally) darker note, Mr. Silverberg cites the public opinion of the citizens of Singapore that America reacted to the barbarism of their penal code only when one of America's own was to be subjected to it, and that they included accusations of racism. (I will assume for the moment, judging by his earlier remark that a Singaporean in America would be considered a "person of color," that Mr. Silverberg agrees with these accusations. If I'm wrong, perhaps he will correct me?) This, too, was striking below the belt!

I do not mean to say that, had Michael Fay been black, the American press would have put pen to paper in his defense nor, had some psychiatrist diagnosed him *in absentia,* that they would have been as generous in finding him unfit to stand punishment. (Please don't believe that I assume my own country to be any better, by the way.) Until a black, brown or red American youth is handed a similar sentence by a foreign court, however, we cannot honestly say that they would not.* We can only say that *most* U.S. citizens only care about how such things are handled in other countries when one of their own is sentenced there. I leave it to your readers to judge the hypocrisy shown thereby.

Before leaving this topic, however, I'll note Mr. Silverberg's reference to Amnesty International's assessment of caning as "cruel, inhuman, and degrading." First, it should also be noted that Amnesty International is not an exclusively American institution; this was not made clear in "Reflections." But perhaps a more important issue is the general lack of respect that people have these days for the freedoms they pretend to cherish. The American Civil Liberties Union, for instance, is an organization supposedly devoted to the notion that everyone should be considered equal under the law. Yet when they seem to favor the rights of people who have been accused of heinous acts to a fair trial, they are seen as advocating crime! Likewise Amnesty International; when they accuse third world countries of torturing dissidents, they're seen as heroes. When, on the other hand, they accuse European and North American countries of racial or financial inequities under the law or by the courts, of inappropriate or inhumane punishments or even use of torture, well then they should mind their own business! One wonders whether freedom is a matter of right or of popularity these days. But this is only my opinion.

Finally, I noted with amusement Mr. Silverberg's reference to the argument put forth by some that Michael Fay should have received

*In fact, even this would not be sufficient. We would then have to go on to prove that America's citizens react with shock, horror, anguish and outrage on most occasions that a white youth is to be caned, *and* usually turns its back when that youth is black. After all, we wouldn't want to condemn the whole U.S. of A. for racism just because it was a slow news day at the Media Circus and young master Fay was handy! ADB

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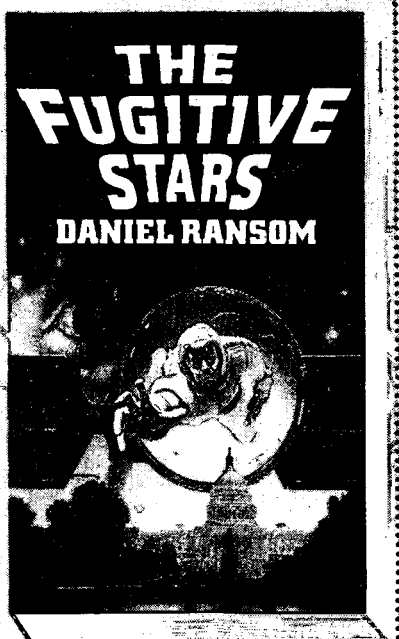

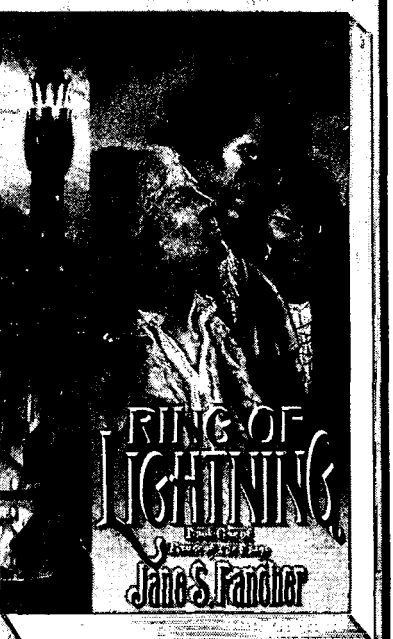

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clemency owing to it being his first offense; "as though the first one *ought* to be free," he said. Well, it *is* a part of British common law, at least, that all dogs are allowed to bite once during their lives without punishment. I doubt that young master Fay's parents would appreciate the comparison, however. Seriously, though, a lighter sentence for one's first offense is common practice in most places, as far as I know at least. But perhaps this, too, merely demonstrates my ignorance?

In conclusion, I'd like to thank you for another eight fine stories and indeed for Mr. Silverberg's very literate editorial and Mr. Cappio's essay, too. Keep up the good work and I'll see you next month.
Sincerely,

Allan D. Burrows
Mississauga, ONT
Canada

To the Editor,

In his editorial "Crime & Punishment," Robert Silverberg thinks he knows what he is talking about in regards to Singapore's "justice system" and the Michael Fay case.

According to Fay, he was accused of that vandalism by another boy, who was being held by the police on that charge, and then arrested. In jail, Fay was repeatedly beaten up and abused until he confessed. He was led to believe that if he did so, he wouldn't be caned.

It was after he was caned, however, that Singapore proved itself to be truly evil. Fay's parents were not allowed to see him for TEN DAYS. The reason for inflicting uncertainty and cruelty upon them in this manner escapes me. Also, Singapore's contestant in the Miss Universe contest was threatened by her government not to say anything to the press about her government's policies. To deny freedom of speech is not an action performed for the public safety. It is an action to safeguard tyranny.

Recently there has been another disturbing case in Singapore, this time involving someone who merely wrote an article criticizing "intolerent regimes" in Asia. Christopher Lingle, an economist who taught at the National University of Singapore, was visited twice by police and questioned about an article he wrote that appeared in *The International Herald Tribune* on 10/7/94. Dr. Lingle figured that he had better get out while the getting was good, so he left the country and turned in his resignation by mail. The charge that the government was bringing against him was "criminal defamation and contempt of court," the contempt of court being based upon inferred criticism of the judiciary system.

All of this fascism would be of no consequence to Americans who don't live in Singapore if it weren't for the fact that editorialists and the people who call radio talk shows all think that caning and other forms of torture are just what crime-ridden America needs —never mind the violation of due process that would go along with such sentences.

Three weeks ago, the Republican Party was voted into control of both the congress and the senate. The radical Right, whose moral bankruptcy drove them to support Iran-Contra traitor Oliver North for the Senate, are salivating at the possi-

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bility of hijacking that victory the way they did in 1980 and trying to create an authoritarian dictatorship. Fascist political pundit Patrick Buchanan is especially fond of advocating that people who break the law should be stripped naked and horsewhipped, making his views more in line with some Islamic fundamentalist country like Iran than with America.

I feel sympathy for Mr. Silverberg that his car was vandalized several times. It's just that with fascism squatting by the side of the road like a vulture waiting for democracy to die so that it can feed on its carcass, for us to say that we should adopt Singapore's ways, even half in jest, is a curse from which we might never recover should such black magic start to come true.

Wallington Simpson Jr.
Montebello, N.Y.

Dear Editor,

I must say—since this is the next-to-last issue of the year, and it's about time I said it—Steven Popkes is a remarkable writer. I just had another moving experience at his insistence through the vehicle of "Doctor Couney's Island." Earlier this year, I enjoyed the sad and lovely "Whistle in the Dark," in the June issue. The mood of Steven Popkes' works is pervasive and lasting, including particularly the feeling engendered by the bittersweet happy ending of "Doctor Couney's Island."

My favorite author, because of his brilliant, dark wit, is Philip K. Dick. He could have used a lesson in heart-wrenching from master plumber Steven Popkes.

Now, back to the want ads or, better, the rest of the December *Asimov's*.

Douglas Crook

We appreciate comments about the magazine, and would like to hear from more of our readers. Editorial correspondence should include the writer's name and address. Letters can be E-mailed to 71154.662@compuserve.com or posted to Letters to the Editor, *Asimov's*, 1540 Broadway, New York, NY 10036. Letters may be shortened and edited for publication.

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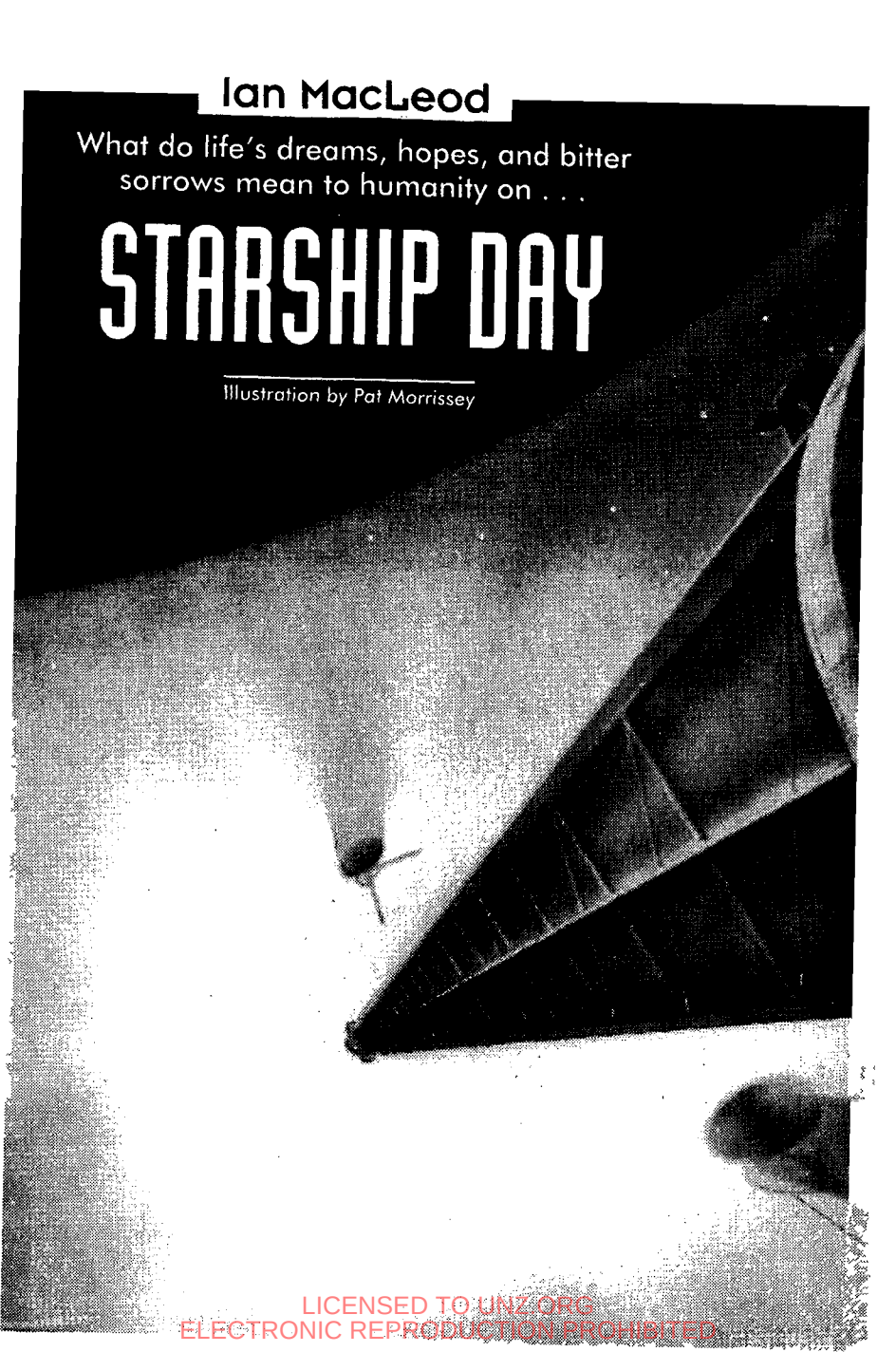
Ian MacLeod

What do life's dreams, hopes, and bitter sorrows mean to humanity on . . .

STARSHIP DAY

Illustration by Pat Morrissey



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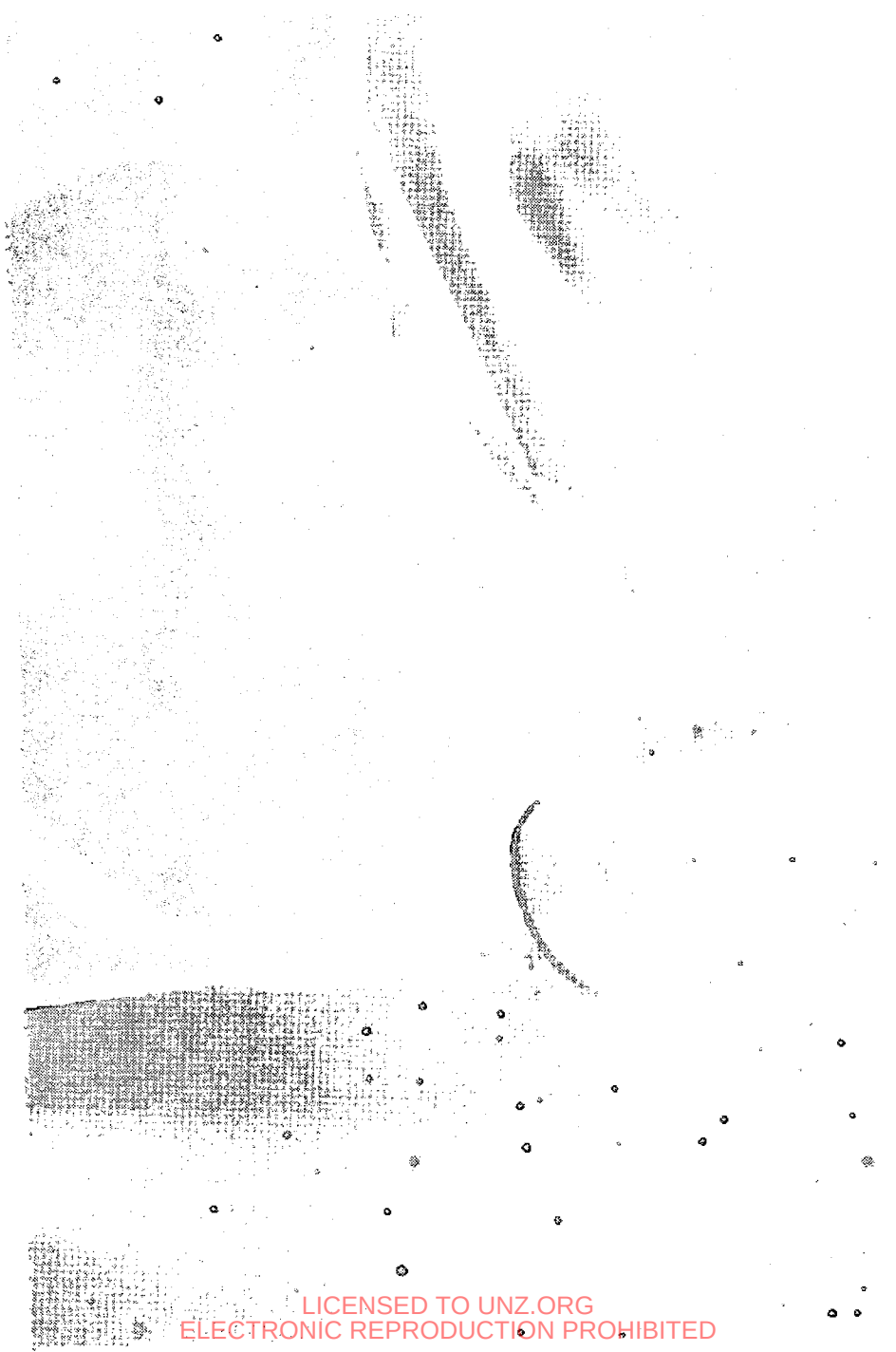

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The news was everywhere. It was in our dreams, it was on TV. Tonight, the travelers on the first starship from Earth would awaken.

That morning, Danous yawned with the expectant creak of shutters, the first stretch of shadow across narrow streets. The air shimmered with the scent of warming pine, it brushed through the shutters and touched our thoughts even as our dreams had faded. For this was Starship Day, and, from tonight, nothing would ever be the same. Of course, there were parties organized. Yacht races across the bay. Holidays for the kids. The prospect of the starship's first transmission, an instantaneous tachyon burst across the light years, had sent the wine sellers and the bakers scurrying toward their stocks and chasing their suppliers. And the suppliers had chased *their* suppliers. And the bread, the fruit, the hats, the dresses, the meat, the marquees, the music had never been in such demand. Not even when. . . . Not even when. . . . Not even when. But there *were* no comparisons. There had never been a day such as this.

As if I needed reminding, the morning paper on the mat was full of it. I'd left my wife Hannah still asleep, weary from the celebrations that had already begun the night before, and there were wine glasses scattered in the parlor, the smell of booze and stale conversation. After starting with early drinks and chatter at the Point Hotel, Hannah's sister Bernice and her husband Rajii had stayed around with us until late. At least, they'd stayed beyond the time I finally left the three of them and went to bed, feeling righteous, feeling like a sourpuss, wondering just what the hell I did feel. But *some* of us still had work to do on this starship morning. I opened the curtains and the shutters and let in the sound and the smell of the sea. I stacked a tray with the butts and bottles and glasses. I squeezed out an orange, filled a bowl with oats and yoghurt and honey. I sat down outside with the lizards in the growing warmth of the patio.

Weighted with a stone, my newspaper fluttered in the soft breeze off the sea. Page after page of gleeful speculation. Discovery. Life. Starship. Hope. Message. Already, I'd had enough. Why couldn't people just *wait?* All it took was for the tide to go in and out, for the sun to rise and fall, for stars and darkness to come, and we'd all *know* the truth anyway. So easy—but after all this time, humanity is still a hurrying race. And I knew that my patients would be full of it at the surgery, exchanging their usual demons for the brief hope that something from outside might change their lives. And I'd have to sit and listen, I'd have to put on my usual caring-Owen act. The stars might be whispering from out of the black far beyond this blue morning, but some of us had to get on with the process of living.

Hannah was still half-asleep when I went in to say goodbye.

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"Sorry about last night," she said.

"Why sorry?"

"You were obviously tired. Rajii does go on."

"What time did they leave?"

"I don't know." She yawned. "What time did you go to bed?"

I smiled as I watched her lying there still tangled in sleep. Now that I had to go, I wanted to climb back in.

"Will you be in for lunch?"

"I'm—meeting someone."

Bad, that. The wrong kind of pause. But Hannah just closed her eyes, rolling back into the sheets and her own starship dreams. I left the room, pulled my cream jacket on over my shirt and shorts, and closed the front door.

I wheeled my bicycle from the lean-to beside the lavender patch and took the rough road down into town. For some reason, part of me was thinking, maybe we should get another dog; maybe that would be a change, a distraction.

Another perfect morning. Fishing boats in the harbor. Nets drying along the quay. Already the sun was high enough to set a deep sparkle on the water and lift the dew off the bougainvillaea draped over the seafront houses. I propped my bike in the shadowed street outside the surgery and climbed the wooden steps to the door. I fed the goldfish tank in reception. I dumped the mail in the tray in my office. I opened a window, sat down at my desk, and turned on the PC, hitting the keys to call up my morning's appointments. Mrs. Edwards scrolled up, 9:00. Sal Mohammed, 10:00. Then John for lunch. Mrs. Sweetney in the afternoon. On a whim, I typed in

About the starship.

PLEASE WAIT

What do you think will happen?

Again, **PLEASE WAIT.**

The computer was right of course. Wait. Just wait. Please wait. A seagull mewed. The PC's fan clicked faintly, ticking away the minutes as they piled into drifts of hours and days. Eventually, I heard the thump of shoes on the steps, and I called, "Come right in," before Mrs. Edwards had time to settle with the old magazines in reception.

"Are you sure, Owen? I mean, if you're busy. . . ."

"The door's open."

Ah, Mrs. Edwards. Red-faced, the smell of eau de cologne already fading into nervous sweat. One of my regulars, one of the ones who keep coming long after they'd forgotten why, and who spend their days agonizing new angles around some old neurosis so that they can lay it in front of me like a cat dropping a dead bird.

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As always, she looked longingly at the soft chair, then sat down on the hard one.

"Big day," she said.

"It certainly is."

"I'm terribly worried," she said.

"About the starship?"

"Of course. I mean, what are they going to *think* of us?"

I gazed at her, my face a friendly mask. Did she mean whatever star-creatures might be out there? Did she mean the travelers in the starship, waking from stasis after so many years? Now *there* was a thought. The travelers, awakening. I suppose they'll wonder about their descendants here on Earth, perhaps even expect those silver-spired cities we all sometimes still dream about, or maybe corpses under a ruined sky, dead rivers running into poisoned seas.

"Mrs. Edwards, there probably won't *be* any aliens. Anyway, they might be benign."

"Benign?" She leaned forward over her handbag and gave me one of her looks. "But even if they *are,* how can we be *sure?*"

After Mrs. Edwards, Sal Mohammed. Sal was an old friend, and thus broke one of the usual rules of my practice. But I'd noticed he was drinking too heavily, and when I'd heard that he'd been seen walking the town at night in his pajamas—not that either of these things was unusual *per se*—I'd rung him and suggested a visit.

He sat down heavily in the comfortable chair and shook his head when I offered coffee. There were thickening grey bags under his eyes.

He asked, "You'll be going to Jay Dax's party tonight?"

"Probably. You?"

"Oh, yes," he said, tired and sad and eager. "I mean, this is the big day, isn't it? And Jay's parties. . . ." He shook his head.

"And how do you really feel?"

"Me? I'm fine. Managing, anyway."

"How are you getting on with those tension exercises?"

His eyes flicked over toward the cork notice board where a solitary child's painting, once so bright, had curled and faded. "I'm finding them hard."

I nodded, wondering for the millionth time what exactly it was that stopped people from helping themselves. Sal still wasn't able to even sit down in a chair for five minutes each day and do a few simple thought exercises. Most annoying of all was the way he still lumbered up to me at do's, his body stuffed into a too-small suit and his face shining with sweat, all thin and affable bonhomie although I knew that he only managed to get out now by tanking up with downers.

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"But today's like New Year's Eve, isn't it?" he said. "Starship Day."

I nodded. "That's a way of seeing it."

"Everything could change—but even if it doesn't, knowing it won't change will be something in itself too, won't it? It's a time to make new resolutions. . . ."

But Sal got vague again when I asked him about his own resolutions, and by the end of our session we were grinding through the usual justifications for the gloom that filled his life.

"I feel as though I'm traveling down these grey and empty corridors," he said. "Even when things happen, nothing ever changes. . . ."

He'd gone on for so long by then—and was looking at me with such sincerity—that I snapped softly back, "Then why don't you give up, Sal? If it's really that bad—what *is* it that keeps you going?"

He looked shocked. Of course, shocking them can sometimes work, but part of me was wondering if I didn't simply want to get rid of Sal. And as he rambled on about the pointlessness of it all, I kept thinking of tonight, and all the other nights. The parties and the dances and the evenings in with Hannah and the quietly introspective walks along the cliffs and the picnics in the cool blue hills. I just kept thinking.

The lunches with John that I marked down on my PC were flexible. In fact, they'd got so flexible recently that one or the other of us often didn't turn up. This particular John was called Erica, and we'd been doing this kind of thing since Christmas, in firelight and the chill snowy breath from the mountains. I've learnt that these kind of relationships often don't transfer easily from one season to another—there's something about the shift in light, the change in the air—but this time it had all gone on for so long that I imagined we'd reached a kind of equilibrium. That was probably when it started to go wrong.

It was our usual place. The Arkoda Bar, up the steps beside the ruins. There was a group a few tables off that I vaguely recalled. Two couples, with a little girl. The girl was older now—before, she'd been staggering like a drunk on toddler's splayed legs; now she was running everywhere—but that was still why I remembered them.

I almost jumped when Erica came up behind me.

"You must be early—or I must be late."

I shrugged. "I haven't been here long."

She sat down and poured what was left of the retsina into the second glass. "So you've been here a while. . . ."

"I was just watching the kid. What time is it?"

"Who cares? Don't tell me you've been working this morning, Owen."

"I can't just cancel appointments just because there's some message coming through from the stars."

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"Why not?"

I blinked, puzzled for a moment, my head swimming in the flat white heat of the sun. "I do it because it's my job, Erica."

"Sorry. Shall we start again?"

I nodded, watching the golden fall of her hair; the sweat-damp strands clinging to her neck, really and truly wishing that we could start all over again. Wishing, too, that we'd be able to talk about something other than the goddamn starship.

But no, Erica was just like everybody else—plotting the kind of day that she could witter on about in years to come. She wanted to rent a little boat so that we could go to some secret cove, swim and fish for shrimps, and bask on the rocks, and watch the night come in. She even had a little TV in her handbag all ready for the broadcast.

I said, "I'm sorry, Erica. I've got appointments. And I've got to go out this evening."

"So have I. You're not the only one with commitments."

"I just can't escape them like you can. I'm a married man."

"Yeah."

The people with the little girl paused in their chatter to look over at us. We smiled sweetly back.

"Let's have another bottle of wine," I suggested.

"I suppose," Erica said, "you just want to go back to that room of yours above the surgery so you can screw me and then fall asleep?"

"I was hoping—"

"—isn't that right? Owen?"

I nodded: it was, after all, a reasonably accurate picture of what I'd had in mind. I mean, all this business with the boat, the secret cove, fishing for shrimps. . . .

I held out my hand to pat some friendly portion of her anatomy, but she leaned back out of my reach. The people with the kid had stopped talking and were staring deeply into their drinks.

"I've been thinking," she said. "This isn't working, is it?"

I kept a professional silence. Whatever was going to be said now, it was better that Erica said it. I mean, I could have gone on about her selfish enthusiasm in bed, her habit (look! she's doing it now!) of biting her nails and spitting them out like seed husks, and the puzzled expression that generally crossed her face when you used any word with more than three syllables. Erica was a sweet, pretty kid. Tanned and warm, forgiving and forgetful. At best, holding her was like holding a flame. But she was still just a rich Daddy's girl, good at tennis and tolerably fine at sex and swimming and happy on a pair of skis. And if you didn't say anything damaging to her kind when you split up, they might even

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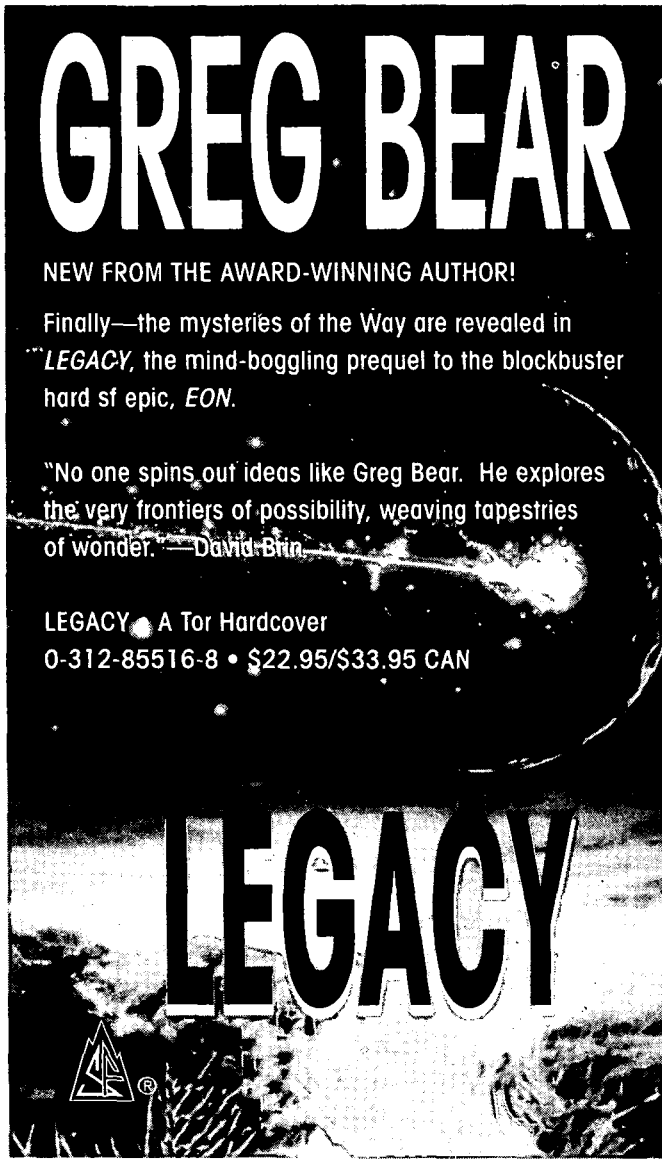
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come back to you years later. By then they'd be softer, sadder, sweeter—ultimately more compromising, but sometimes worth the risk.

So I sat there as Erica poured out her long essay on How Things Had Gone Wrong, and the sun beat down, and the air filled with the smell of hot myrtle, and the sea winked far below. And the little girl chased blue and red butterflies between the tables, and her parents sat listening to the free show in vaguely awestruck silence. It even got to me after a while. I had to squint and half-cover my face. Selfish, calculating, shallow, moody. Nothing new—Erica was hardly one for in-depth personal analysis—but she warmed to her subject, searching the sky for the next stinging adjective. Some of them were surprisingly on target—and for her, surprisingly long. I thought of that scarred and ancient starship tumbling over some strange new world, preparing to send us all a message. And I thought of me, sitting in the heat with the empty bottle of retsina, listening to this.

"You're right," I said eventually. "You deserve better than me. Find someone your own age, Erica. Someone with your own interests."

Erica gazed at me. Interests. Did she *have* any interests?

"But—"

"—No." I held up a hand, noticing with irritation that it was quivering like a leaf. "Everything you said is true."

"Just as long as you don't say we can still be friends."

"But I think we will," I said, pushing back the chair and standing up.

Quickly bending down to kiss her cheek before she could lean away, I felt a brief pang of loss. But I pushed it away. Onward, onward. . . .

"You'll learn," I said, "that everything takes time. Think how long it's taken us to get to the stars."

I waved to her, and to the silent group with their sweet little kid. Then I jogged down the hot stone steps to my bike.

Back at the office, there was a note stuffed through the letterbox and the phone was ringing. The phone sounded oddly sad and insistent, but by the time I'd read Odette Sweetney's message canceling her afternoon appointment on account of what she called *This Starship Thing,* it had clanged back into silence.

I decided to clear the flat upstairs. The doorway led off from reception, with a heavy bolt to make it look unused—to keep up the charade with Hannah. I'd sometimes go on to her about how difficult it was to find a trusty tenant, and she'd just nod. I'd really given up worrying about whether she believed me.

The gable room was intolerably hot. I opened the windows, then set about removing the signs of Erica's habitation. I pulled off the sheets. I shook out the pillows. I picked up the old straw sunhat that lay beneath

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the wicker chair. For the life of me, I couldn't ever remember Erica ever wearing such a thing. Perhaps it had belonged to Chloe, who'd been the previous John; straw hats were more her kind of thing. But had it really sat there all these months, something for Erica to stare at as we made love? It was all so thoughtlessly uncharacteristic of me. Under the bed, I found several blonde hairs, and a few chewed-off bits of fingernail.

I re-bolted the door and went back into the surgery. I turned on the PC and re-scheduled Odette Sweetney's appointment. Then I gazed at the phone, somehow knowing that it was going to ring again. The sound it made was grating, at odds with the dusty placidity of my surgery, the sleepy white town and the sea beyond the window. I lifted the receiver, then let it drop. Ahh, silence. Today, everything could wait. For all I knew, we'd all be better tomorrow. Miraculously happy and healed.

I locked the door and climbed onto my bicycle. I was determined to make the most of my rare free afternoon—no John, no patients—but time already stretched ahead of me like this steep white road. It's a problem I've always had, what to do when I'm on my own. The one part of my work at the surgery that invariably piques my interest is when my patients talk about solitude. I'm still curious to know what other people do when they're alone, leaning forward in my chair to ask questions like a spectator trying to fathom the rules of some puzzling new game. But for the second half of my marriage with Hannah, I'd found it much easier to keep busy. In the days, I work, or I chase Johns and screw. In the evenings, we go to dinners and parties. The prospect of solitude—of empty space with nothing to react to except your own thoughts—always leaves me feeling scared. So much better to be good old Owen in company, so much easier to walk or talk or drink or sulk or screw with some kind of *audience* to respond to.

I cycled on. The kids were playing, the cats were lazing on the walls. People were getting drunk in the cafés, and the yachts were gathering to race around the bay. Our house lies east of the town, nesting with the other white villas above the sea. I found Hannah sitting alone in the shadowed lounge, fresh mint and ice chattering in the glass she was holding, her cello propped unplayed beside the music stand in the far corner. When I come home unexpectedly, I like it best of all when she's actually playing. Sometimes, I'll just hang around quietly and unannounced in some other part of the house, or sit down under the fig tree in the garden, listening to that dark sound drifting out through the windows, knowing that she doesn't realize she has an audience—that I'm home. She's a fine player, is Hannah, but she plays best unaccompanied, when she doesn't realize anyone is listening. Sometimes, on days when there's a rare fog over the island and the hills are lost in grey, the house will start to sing too, the wind-chimes to tinkle, the floorboards to

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creak in rhythm, the cold radiators to hum. The whole of her heart and the whole of our marriage is in that sound. I sit listening in the damp garden or in another room, wishing I could finally reach through it to the words and the feelings that must surely lie beyond.

"You should be outside," I said, briskly throwing off my jacket, lifting the phone off its hook. "A day like this. The yacht race is about to start."

"Sussh. . . ." She was watching TV. Two experts, I saw, were talking. Behind them was an old picture of the fabled starship.

"You haven't been watching this crap all day?"

"It's *interesting*," she said.

The picture changed to a fuzzy video shot of old Earth. People everywhere, more cars in the streets than you'd have thought possible. Then other shots of starving people with flies crawling around their eyes. Most of them seemed to be black, young, female.

"I guess we've come a long way," I said, getting a long glass from the marble-topped corner cabinet and filling it with the stuff that Hannah had made up in a jug. It tasted suspiciously non-alcoholic, but I decided to stick with it for now, and to sit down on the sofa beside her and try, as the grey-haired expert on the screen might have put it, to make contact.

Hannah looked at me briefly when I laid my hand on her thigh, but then she re-crossed her legs and turned away. No chance of getting *her* into bed then, either. The TV presenter was explaining that many of the people on the starship had left relatives behind. And here, he said, smiling his presenter's smile, is one of them. The camera panned to an old lady. Her Dad, it seemed, was one of the travelers up there. Now, she was ancient. She nodded and trembled like a dry leaf. Some bloody father, I thought. I wonder what excuse he'll give tonight, leaving his daughter as a baby, then next saying hello across light years to a lisping hag.

"Oh, Jesus. . . ."

"What's the matter?" Hannah asked.

"Nothing." I shook my head.

"Did you have an okay morning?"

"It was fine. I thought I'd come back early, today being today."

"That's nice. You've eaten?"

"I've had lunch."

I stood up and wandered back over to the cabinet, topping my drink up to the rim with vodka. Outside, in the bay, the gun went off to signify the start of the yacht race. I stood on the patio and watched the white sails turn on a warm soft wind that bowed the heavy red blooms in our garden and set the swing down the steps by the empty sandpit creaking on its rusted hinges.

I went back inside.

Hannah said, "You're not planning on getting drunk, are you?"

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I shrugged and sat down again. The fact was, I'd reached a reasonable equilibrium. The clear day outside and this shadowed room felt smooth and easy on my eyes and skin. I'd managed to put that ridiculous scene with Erica behind me, and the retsina, and now the vodka, were seeing to it that nothing much else took its place. Eventually, the TV experts ran out of things to say, and the studio faded abruptly and gave way to an old film. I soon lost the plot and fell asleep. And I dreamed, thankfully and gratefully, about nothing. Of deep, endless, starless dark.

We dressed later and drove through Danous in the opentop toward Jay Dax's villa up in the hills. All the shops were open after the long siesta. Music and heat and light poured across the herringboned cobbles, and the trinket stalls were full of replicas of the starship. You could take your pick of earrings, keyrings, lucky charms, models on marble stands with rubies for rockets, kiddie toys. I added to the general mayhem by honking the horn and revving the engine to get through the crowds. And I found myself checking the lamplit faces, wondering if Erica was here, or where else she might be. But all I could imagine were giggles and sweaty embraces. Erica was a bitch—always was, always would be. Now, some *other* girl, some child who, these fifteen years on, would be almost her build, her age. . . .

Then, suddenly—as we finally made it out of town—we saw the stars. They'd all come out tonight, a shimmering veil over the grey-dark mountains.

"I was thinking, this afternoon," Hannah said, so suddenly that I knew she must have been playing the words over in her head. "That we need to find time for ourselves."

"Yes," I said. "Trouble is, when you do what I do for a living. . . ."

"You get sick of hearing about problems? You don't want to know about your *own?*"

Her voice was clear and sweet over the sound of the engine and the whispering night air. I glanced across and saw from the glint of her eyes that she meant what she was saying. I accelerated over the brow of a hill into the trapped sweetness of the valley beyond, wishing that I hadn't drunk the retsina and the vodka, wishing that I'd answered the phone in the surgery, fighting back a gathering sense of unease.

I said, "We haven't really got much to complain about, have we? One tragedy in our whole lives, and at least that left a few happy memories. Anyone should be able to cope with that. And time—do you really think we're short of time?"

She folded her arms. After all, *she'd* been the one who'd gone to pieces. *I'd* been the source of strength. Good old Owen who—all things considered—took it so well. And after everything, after all the Johns, and the

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warm and pretty years in this warm and pretty location, and with business at the surgery still going well, how could I reasonably complain?

Soon there were other cars ahead of us, other guests heading for parties in the big villas. And there was a campfire off to the right, people dancing and flickering like ghosts through the bars of the forest. We passed through the wrought iron gates, and Jay Dax's white villa floated into view along the pines, surrounded tonight by a lake of polished coachwork. We climbed out. All the doors were open, all the windows were bright. A waltz was playing. People were milling everywhere.

I took Hannah's hand. We climbed the marble steps to the main doorway and wandered in beneath a cavernous pink ceiling. The Gillsons and the Albarets were there. Andre Prilui was there too, puffed up with champagne after a good showing in the Starship Day yacht race. Why, if only *Spindrift* hadn't tacked across his bows on the way around the eastern buoy . . . and look, here comes Owen, Good Old Owen with his pretty cello-playing wife, Hannah.

"Hey!"

It was Rajii, husband of Hannah's sister Bernice. He took us both by the arm, steering us along a gilded corridor.

"Come on, the garden's where everything's happening."

I asked, "Have you seen Sal?"

"Sal?" Rajii said, pushing back a lock of his black hair, "Sal Mohammed?" Already vague with drink and excitement. "No, now you mention it. Not a sign. . . ."

This was a big party even by Jay Dax's standards. The lanterns strung along the huge redwoods that bordered the lawns enclosed marquees, an orchestra, swingboats, mountainous buffets. No matter what news came through on the tachyon burst from the starship, the party already had the look of a great success.

Bernice came up to us. She kissed Hannah and then me, her breath smelling of wine as she put an arm round my waist, her lips seeking mine. We were standing on the second of the big terraces leading down from the house. "Well," Rajii said, "What's *your* guess, then? About this thing from the stars."

Ah yes, this thing from the stars. But predictions this close to the signal were dangerous; I mean, who wanted to be remembered as the clown who got it outrageously wrong?

"I think," Hannah said, "That the planet they find will be green. I mean, the Earth's blue, Mars is red, Venus is white. It's about time we had a green planet."

"What about you, Owen?"

"What's the point in guessing?" I said.

I pushed my way off down the steps, touching shoulders at random,

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asking people if they'd seen Sal. At the far end of the main lawn, surrounded by scaffolding, a massive screen reached over the treetops, ready to receive the starship's transmission. Presently, it was black; the deepest color of a night sky without stars, like the open mouth of God preparing to speak. But my face already felt numb from the drink and the smiling. I could feel a headache coming on.

I passed through an archway into a walled garden and sat down on a bench. Overhead now, fireworks were crackling and banging like some battlefield of old. I reached beside me for the drink I'd forgotten to bring, and slumped back, breathing in the vibrant night scents of the flowers. These days, people were getting used to me disappearing, Owen walking out of rooms just when everyone was laughing, Owen vanishing at dances just as the music was starting up. Owen going off in a vague huff and sitting somewhere, never quite out of earshot, never quite feeling alone. People don't mind—oh, that's Owen—they assume I'm playing some amusing private game. But really, I hate silence, space, solitude, any sense of waiting. Hate and fear it as other people might fear thunder or some insect. Hate it, and therefore have to keep peeking. Even in those brief years when Hannah and I weren't alone and our lives seemed filled, I could still feel the empty dark waiting. The black beyond the blue of these warm summer skies.

Somewhere over the wall, a man and a woman were laughing. I imagined Bernice coming to find me, following when I walked off, as I was sure she was bound to do soon. The way she'd kissed me tonight had been a confirmation, and Rajii was a fool—so who could blame her? Not that Bernice would be like Erica, but right now that was an advantage. A different kind of John was just what I needed. Bernice would be old and wise and knowing, and the fact that she was Hannah's sister—that alone would spice things up for a while.

I thought again of the day I'd been through: scenes and faces clicking by. Hannah half asleep in bed this morning; Mrs. Edwards in the surgery; hopeless Sal Mohammed; young and hopeful Erica; then Hannah again, and the dullness of the drink, and all the people here at this party, the pointless endless cascade; and the starship, the starship, the starship, and the phone ringing unanswered in the surgery and me taking it off the hook there and doing so again when I got home. And no sign of Sal this evening, although he'd told me he was going to come.

I walked back out of the rose garden just as the fog of the fireworks was fading and the big screen was coming on. I checked my watch. Not long now, but still I climbed the steps and went back through the nearly empty house and found the car. I started it up and drove off down the drive, suddenly and genuinely worried about Sal, although mostly just

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thinking how tedious and typical of me this was becoming, buggering off at the most crucial moment on this most crucial of nights.

But it was actually good to be out on the clean night road with the air washing by me. No other cars about now, everybody had got somewhere and was doing something. Everybody was waiting. And I could feel the stars pressing down, all those constellations with names I could never remember. Sal Mohammed's house was on the cliffs to the west of the town, and so I didn't have to drive through Danous to get there. I cut the engine outside and sat for a moment, listening to the beat of the sea, and faintly, off through the hedges and the gorse and the myrtle, the thump of music from some neighbor's party. I climbed out, remembering days in the past. Sal standing in a white suit on the front porch, beckoning us all in for those amazing meals he then used to cook. Sal with that slight sense of camp that he always held in check, Sal with his marvelous, marvelous way with a story. Tonight, all the front windows were dark, and the paint, as it will in this coastal environment if you don't have it seen to regularly, was peeling.

I tried the bell and banged the front door. I walked around the house, peering in at each of the windows. At the back, the porch doors were open, and I went inside, turning on lights, finding the usual bachelor wreckage. I could hear a low murmur, a TV, coming from Sal's bedroom. Heavy with premonition, I pushed open the door, and saw the colored light playing merely over glasses and bottles on a rucked and empty bed. I closed the door and leaned back, breathless with relief, then half-ducked as a shadow swept over me. Sal Mohammed was hanging from the ceiling.

I dialed the police from the phone by the bed. It took several beats for them to answer and I wondered as I waited who would be doing their job tonight. But the voice that answered was smooth, mechanical, unsurprised. Yes, they'd be along. Right away. I put down the phone and gazed at Sal hanging there in the shifting TV light, wondering if I should cut the cord he'd used, or pick up the chair. Wondering whether I'd be interfering with evidence. The way he was hanging and the smell in the room told me that it didn't matter. He'd done a good job, had Sal; it even looked, from the broken tilt of his head, that he'd made sure it ended quickly. But Sal—although he was incapable of admitting it to himself—was bright and reliable and competent in almost everything he did. I opened a window, then sat back down on the bed, drawn despite myself toward the scene that the TV in the corner was now playing.

The announcer had finally finished spinning things out, and the ancient photo of the starship in pre-launch orbit above the Moon had been pulled out to fill the screen. It fuzzed, and the screen darkened for a moment. Then there was another picture, in motion this time, and at

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least as clear as the last one, taken from one of the service pods that drifted like flies around the main body of the starship. In the harsh white light of a new sun, the starship looked old. Torn gantries, loose pipes, black flecks of meteorite craters. Still, the systems must be functioning, otherwise we wouldn't be seeing this at all. And of course it looked weary—what else was there to expect?

The screen flickered. Another view around the spaceship, and the white flaring of that alien sun, and then, clumsily edited, another. Then inside. Those long grey tunnels, dimly and spasmodically lit, floorless and windowless, that were filled by the long tubes of a thousand living coffins. The sleepers. Then outside again, back amid the circling drones, and those views, soon to become tedious, of the great starship drifting against a flaring sun.

As I watched, my hand rummaged amid the glasses and the bottles that Sal had left on the bed. But they were all empty. And I thought of Erica, how she was spending these moments, and of all the other people at the gatherings and parties. I, at least, would be able to give an original answer if I was asked, in all the following years—Owen, what were you doing when we first heard from the stars?

The TV was now showing a long rock, a lump of clinker really, flipping over and over, catching light, then dark. Then another rock. Then back to the first rock again. Or it could have been a different one—it was hard to tell. And this, the announcer suddenly intoned, breaking in on a silence I hadn't been aware of, is all the material that orbits this supposedly friendly cousin of our sun. No planets, no comets even. Despite all the studies of probability and orbital perturbation, there was just dust and rubble here, and a few mile-long rocks.

There would be no point now in waking the sleepers in their tunnels and tubes. Better instead to unfurl the solar sails and use the energy from this sun to find another one. After all, the next high-probability star lay a mere three light years away, and the sleepers could dream through the time of waiting. Those, anyway, who still survived. . . .

I stood up and turned off the TV. Outside, I could hear a car coming. I opened the front door and stood watching as it pulled in from the road. Hardly a car at all really, or a van. Just a grey colorless block. But the doors opened, and the police emerged. I was expecting questions—maybe even a chance to break the news about the starship—but the police were faceless, hooded, dark. They pushed by me and into the house without speaking.

Outside, it was quiet now. The noise of the neighbor's party had ceased, and there was just the sound and the smell of the sea. People would be too surprised to be disappointed. At least, at first. Sal had obviously seen it coming—or had known that there was nothing about this Starship

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Day that could change things for him. Death, after all, isn't an option that you can ever quite ignore. And it's never as random as people imagine, not even if it happens to a kid just out playing on a swing in their own back garden. Not even then. You always have to look for some kind of purpose and meaning and reason, even inside the dark heart of what seems like nothing other than a sick and pointless accident.

The police came out again, lightly carrying something that might or might not have been Sal's body. Before they climbed back into their grey van, one of them touched my shoulder with fingers as cool as the night air and gave me a scrap of paper. After they'd driven off, I got back into my car and took the road down into the now quiet streets of Danous, and parked by the dark harbor, and went up the steps to my surgery.

It all seemed odd and yet familiar, to be sitting at my desk late on Starship Day with the PC humming. The screen flashed **PLEASE WAIT.** For what? How many years? Just how much longer will the dreamers have to go on dreaming? I felt in my pocket for the piece of paper, and carefully typed in the long string of machine code. Then I hit return.

PLEASE WAIT.

I waited. The words dribbled down off the screen, then the screen itself melted, and me with it, and then the room. The lifting of veils, knowing where and what I truly was, never came as the surprise I expected. Each time it got less so. I wondered about what Sal Mohammed had said to me in the dream of this morning. All that stuff about grey endless corridors—was he seeing where he really was? But I supposed that after this number of journeys and disappointments, after so many dead and lifeless suns, and no matter how well I did my job, it was bound to happen. How many Starship Days had there been now? How many years of silence and emptiness? And just how far were we, now, from Earth? Even here, I really didn't want to think about that.

Instead, and as always, I kept busy, moving along the cold airless tunnels on little drifts of gas, my consciousness focused inside one of the starship's few inner drones that was still truly functioning and reliable, even if it didn't go quite straight now and I had to keep the sensors pointing to one side. Outside, through the occasional porthole, I could see others like me who were helping to prepare the starship for another journey. A spindly thing like a spider with rivet guns on each of its legs went by, and I wondered about Erica, whether that really *was* her. I wondered whether it was actually possible, with your consciousness inside ancient plastic and metal, to laugh.

Details scrolled up of how many sleepers we'd lost this time. A good dozen. It mostly happened like Sal; not from soft or hard-systems failure, but simply because the dream of Danous ceased to work. That, anyway,

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was the only reason I could find. I paused now beside Sal's coffin. Ice had frosted over the faceplate entirely. I reached out a claw to activate the screen beside him, and saw that he was actually an even bigger loss than I'd imagined—a specialist in solar power. Just the kind of man we'd need out there on some mythical friendly planet. Then I found my own coffin, and paused my hovering drone to look down through the face plate at the grey and placid version of the features I saw each day in the mirror. In the coffin just above me—or below—was Hannah. Ah, Hannah, a few strands of brittle hair still nestled against her cheek, and that gold chain around her bare neck that she'd insisted on wearing back on Earth when we set out together on this great adventure. Just looking at her, part of me longed to touch, to escape these lenses and claws and get back into the dream. Next time, I promised myself, tomorrow, I'll change, I'll do things differently. No, I won't screw John—Bernice. I might even admit to being unfaithful. After all, Hannah knows. She must know. It's one of the things that's keeping this sense of separateness between us.

I tilted the gas jets and drifted to the coffin that lay beside mine and Hannah's. Like Sal's, like so many others I'd passed, the faceplate was iced over, the contents desiccated by slow cold years of interstellar space. There was really no sign, now, of the small body that had once lived and laughed and dreamed with us inside it. Our child, gone, and with every year, with every starfall, with the hard cold rain that seeps through this starship, with every John, the chances of Hannah and I ever having another are lessened. But first, of course, we need that green or blue or red world. We need to awake and stretch our still limbs, and breathe the stale ancient air that will flood these passages, and move, pushing and clumsy, to one of the portholes, and peer out, and see the clouds swirling and the oceans and the forests and the deserts, and *believe.* Until then. . . .

I snapped back out from the drone, passing down the wires into the main databank, where Danous awaited. And yes, of course, the morning would be warm again, and perfect, with just a few white clouds that the sun will soon burn away. Nothing could be done, really, to make it better than it already is. There's nothing I can change. And as I turned off my PC and left the surgery and climbed back into my car for the drive home, I could already feel the sense of expectation and disappointment fading. Tomorrow, after all, will always be tomorrow. And today is just today.

Rajii's car was sitting in the drive, and he was inside in the lounge with Bernice and Hannah. I could hear them laughing as I banged the door, and the clink of their glasses.

"Where *were* you?" Rajii asked, lounging on the rug. Bernice pulled on a joint, and looked at me, and giggled. Hannah, too, seemed happy and

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relaxed—as she generally gets by this time in the evening, although I haven't quite worked out what it is that she's taking.

I shrugged and sat down on the edge of a chair. "I was just out."

"Here. . . ." Hannah got up, her voice and movements a little slurred. "Have a drink, Owen."

I ignored the glass she offered me. "Look," I said, "I'm tired. Some of us have to work in the morning. I really must go to bed. . . ."

So I went out of the room on the wake of their smoke and their booze and their laughter, feeling righteous, feeling like a sourpuss, wondering just what the hell I did feel. And I stripped and I showered and I stood in the darkness staring out of the window across our garden, where the swing still hung beside the overgrown sandpit, rusting and motionless in the light of a brilliant rising Moon. And I could still hear the sound of Hannah and Bernice and Rajii's laughter from down the hall, and even sense, somehow, the brightness of their anticipation. I mean . . . What if . . . Who knows . . . Not even when . . . Not even when . . . Not even when . . . Not even. . . .

Shaking my head, I climbed into bed and pulled over the sheets. And I lay there listening to their voices in the spinning darkness as I was slowly overtaken by sleep.

In my dreams, I found that I was smiling. For tomorrow would be Starship Day, and anything could happen. ●

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TIKI

You've been scrimshawed from within,
bones knurled and sculpted
by parasitic artisans, nematodes
at work on the Sistine Chapel
of rib cage clavicle.

Your pelvis is rendered Corinthian
by unknown flukes, fleurs-de-lys
adorn the sacrum, your skull
is intaglioed like a Mayan stele.
Your doctor marvels

at the odd protuberances,
repudiates current practice
and takes up phrenology. Your wife
is disturbed by the knobbiness
of your embrace, is secretly grateful

that at least a part of you
hasn't changed. The X-rays reveal
everything, the work of art
you've become, a baroque masterpiece
beneath the skin. Your nightmares

are filled with sawbones
in a flensing frenzy. Prematurely,
art collectors and osteologists alike
offer millions for your memento mori.
You're losing weight, you're skin and bones.
Caryatides are giving you the eye.

—Keith Allen Daniels

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Tanith Lee

EDWIGE

Tanith Lee is the author of fifty-eight novels and collections, one hundred and forty short stories, four BBC radio plays, and two episodes of the BBC's television series, *Blakes Seven*. Her most recent American publications include *Gold Unicorn* (Byron Preiss), which is the sequel to her novel *Black Unicorn*, and an historical novel on the French Revolution, *The Gods Are Thirsty* (Overlook).

Illustration by Steve Cavallo

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Late into their teenage years, Agatha and Margaret had played with dolls, dressing them, powdering their faces, arranging their long clusters of hair with ribbons. Now that they were in their sixties and seventies, the large old house was still filled by these dolls. They had been stationed on sofas, leant in window seats, propped at the mahogany table in preposterous evening wear. Sometimes the sisters fussed with them. Mostly the dolls simply sat, displaying the indifference of their kind, glassy eyed and over-dressed.

Agatha, the younger sister, had also the companionship of her lap-dog, Sirius. Sirius was that unusual phenomenon, an ugly animal, and he had a nature to match. His squashed face emitted streams of yaps and saliva. His fat, short-haired body, smelling of Agatha's lavender and camphor, trembled with annoyance at any change in the rota of his days. Mostly he lay on Agatha, immovable as a fat stone. Now and then he might be persuaded to waddle a few inches along the terrace. But the huge overgrown garden with its adjacent woods did not interest him. Sirius was strictly a homebody. He would snap at anyone and anything, however, and Agatha's hands and the furniture were evidence of the strength of his sharp if unwashed teeth. Margaret avoided contact with Sirius, although he sometimes, on the rare occasions that he was at ground level, snapped at her ankles.

Born in foreign climes, later locked in the wet woody environ of the house, and for years under parental domination, few other contacts had come the sisters' way.

One blustery autumn afternoon they were driving in their ancient car along the narrow lanes. Margaret, who drove, had proposed the trip, but the car gave off its eternal scraping and booming noises, and Agatha, with Sirius bundled in a shawl on her knees, was sure they would break down.

Suddenly in a windy hedgerow something caught their attention.

"Look," cried Agatha, "it is a child."

"Some gypsy's brat, no doubt," said Margaret.

Nevertheless the position of the child exerted on them a strange fascination, and the car was stopped.

Sirius yapped his displeasure.

"Hush, dear," said Agatha. Sirius nipped her fingers.

The child meanwhile sat in the hedge, gazing back at them with a serene blue eye.

It was quite naked, or almost quite naked, a female of about four years of age, and had presumably been planted in the hedge the way one would wedge, of all things, a *doll*. It did not move anything but its head, which

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was rimmed by a mass of bright fair hair, that looked both clean and combed.

Most odd of all, across its small, pale and perfect face, stretched a bandage. One eye, the left, looked on. But the right was hidden.

The bandage was quite as clean as the child appeared to be.

"How peculiar," said Margaret. "It seems to have been left there purposely."

"What can have happened to its poor eye?" asked tender-hearted Agatha.

"Doubtless some brutality of the parents."

"What shall we do?"

"I might," said Margaret, "drive to the village, and report the matter to the police."

"Home is much nearer," said Agatha. "Surely we should not leave the mite here."

The sisters considered and Sirius burped noisesomely and growled.

The child meanwhile began fetchingly to play with its curls. Presently it raised one arm and made a gesture of waving at the sisters. "Lady!" it said, in a high pure voice.

"Oh the poor thing," said Agatha. "Take Sirius, Margaret, and I shall fetch it in."

Margaret declined the honor of holding the dog, and so Agatha parked him on the seat, which he proceeded to bite in rage.

Lifting the child from the hedge was the easiest thing. It came out like a wild rose.

The sisters stared at it.

It waved its arm again, and said, "Cold."

"We must get it home at once before it catches a severe chill."

Agatha snatched the shawl from Sirius—who screamed—and wound the child into it.

"We can send Daisy to the village to tell them."

Margaret started the car.

The child took up residence in the old house without any trouble. And Daisy the housemaid was not dispatched to the village for several days. When she did go, there were no reports of any lost children, and on the whole she thought better of telling the constabulary about the sisters' action.

Margaret and Agatha were in raptures over the child.

They bathed it and powdered it and dressed it in the fine linen and dresses of their dolls, which fitted it exactly.

When the time came to examine what lay beneath the bandage, Margaret took charge. She removed the barrier carefully and found no mark

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or bruise. Indeed, there was a clear and piercingly bright eye. But this right eye was not like the left, blue one. No, the right eye was of a fierce tawny shade. The child evinced some curious symptoms when both eyes were uncovered. First of all it fell down. Then it made a loud rasping. Then it put its hand over the tawny eye and reached after the bandage.

The sisters took counsel of each other and decided that by far the best thing would be to replace the bandage—for the tawny eye was very sharp and glittering, not like the blue eye at all. Margaret saw to the bandage, and the child fell to cooing and playing with its fingers in the normal charming way.

"We must send Daisy for the doctor," said Margaret.

However, this was somehow overlooked.

The short days and long evenings passed before the warm fire of the drawing room, toying with the child on the hearth, and watching it amuse itself with wool and string and beads, and sometimes with the very dolls it had replaced. It was always careful with them. And, picked up by Agatha or Margaret, it was delightful, so soft and pliant and delicious smelling.

Sirius was alone in his opinion that the child was not an improvement to the household. He yapped and snapped and came to be shut in the cold sitting room, where he howled until he coughed, and then chewed up the rugs and fringes.

Since the child was a girl, the sisters presently named it for their grandmother, Edwige.

By Christmas time, it seemed to them that they had always had it, that it was theirs.

The year revolved, and spring came, and next the summer, and outside the old house the large white oaks were heavy with green foliage.

Agatha and Margaret sat with the child below the terrace, where a little stream gurgled over brown stones.

The child, who they had not yet taught to read, was employed, listening, rapt as Agatha read out a story from a large book of fairy tales.

Sometimes Edwige would ask a question, as she generally did. Conversely they had never had an answer to anything they had asked of her, but then they had not tried very hard, to discover her parentage or origins.

"The beautiful princess," read Agatha.

"Why was she beautiful?" asked the child.

"Because a good fairy had made her so at her christening."

Daisy, who stood at a terrace window with the duster in her hand, thought to herself that the child had never been christened. But even as

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she considered this, the whines and snarls of Sirius from the sitting room brought her to think well of Edwige.

"The beautiful princess looked down from her tower, and saw only the great forest, thick with trees."

"Is that the forest?" asked Edwige, pointing away over the garden to the green woods.

"No, no," laughed Agatha. "A forest is much larger and more wild."

The child pondered. And Margaret said, "Now it is time for luncheon."

But Agatha said, "Let me just read to the end of this part."

And she went on to say that in the wild forest dwelled all manner of strange beasts, so that travelers were afraid to venture there.

Margaret frowned and said Edwige would have nightmares, but Edwige only smiled.

Later, when they had had their lunch, Edwige asked to walk in the woods, and so they took her there, holding her fast by the hand.

Edwige stared at everything, and saw things that Agatha and Margaret missed. A blackbird on a bough, a spotted snake, a bee in a rhododendron.

"We must teach Edwige to read," said Margaret that evening.

"Yes, but she listens so nicely."

They thought of this, and decided it might wait a little longer.

"She has grown a great deal," said Agatha. "The green dress is too small now."

"We must have Daisy run her up some clothes."

So they went to the upper rooms of the house, where for ages items had been carefully stored. From tissue paper they took bolts of amber and rose-pink silk, lace edgings, and the exquisite unused underthings of young girls, wrapped among violet sachets. There too they found an eye-patch of black satin, and going down to Edwige, made her a present of it.

Edwige seemed pleased. She looked now like a lovely pirate doll, quite at odds with herself.

As Sirius yowled imprisoned in the distance, Edwige sat staring at the green woods beyond the window, with her one lucent blue eye.

Autumn drew on again, and Margaret and Agatha went driving with Edwige, showing her the country lanes, which apparently seemed quite alien to her. Sirius sat bad-temperedly on Agatha's lap. He had never attempted to bite Edwige.

They passed at length the village green, and behind the houses, came upon the public house. The landlord was at the door, sunning himself in the orange sunshine. Alerted by a bang from the car, he looked up and hailed Margaret.

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"Come in, ladies, come in."

"No, thank you, Mr. Deacon."

"Yes. To the ladies' parlor. Take a sherry. Despite that sun, it is a cold day." It was not.

Agatha said, "Perhaps we might."

"Yes, yes, come in," insisted Mr. Deacon, "and see the trophy the men bagged in August. Craziest looking thing it is."

Margaret and Agatha glanced at each other. Something caused Margaret to halt the grunting car.

Edwige went with them, and a slavering Sirius, who disapproved of strong drink.

There on the walls were portraits of old grandees of the village, and a stuffed pike in a case.

Mr. Deacon drew them through the main room, where a few elderly drinkers sat over their briars. No comment was passed on Edwige, though the old heads turned.

"Look at this now," said Mr. Deacon.

They looked. It was a monstrous thing.

A great bluish red bird a little like a turkey, fastened on the wall behind glass. It had a human face. It had a woman's face. And yet, beaked and ferocious, it did not.

"The shoot," said Mr. Deacon, "strayed through the woods. And they took this. Funniest thing they had seen in half a century. Not good eating. Gave it to the pub. Look at the eyes now, faithfully represented in glass."

Margaret and Agatha gazed, and Edwige also, her pale fair face uncrumpled.

Sirius dribbled.

They had their sherry in the ladies' parlor, Edwige a glass of milk. Mr. Deacon waved them off.

Neither sister discussed the peculiar bird, nor did the child who asked so many questions.

Daisy spoke to the cook in the dark kitchen.

"I never thought it right. That child learns nothing. It does nothing."

"There," said the cook, scraping carrots.

"And just like a doll it is. Lazy. And that bad eye. Who tends to that?"

"There."

"I saw it by the stream this morning. It was dancing. Bobbing up and down. Then you see it sitting there, and it might be a doll."

Somewhere in the house Sirius barked and yowled.

"I could just poison that dog."

"There."

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* * *

Margaret and Agatha looked askance at the child.

They could not perpetually ignore . . . just like the older dolls, there was a fullness at the chest of Edwige. She must, when they found her —were *given* her—have been greater in years than they supposed. They went to the attics and unrolled fresh bales of mauve and rose and yellow silk.

One winter morning, Sirius left the comfort of Agatha's coverlet, and crept down the cold stairs of the house.

He did not often move voluntarily, but today the galvanic of several seasons had finally caught him up.

Grunting like a grampus, he gained the lower floor, and stole, on clicking, cumbersome paws, towards the drawing room door.

There he paused in affront—most things affronted him. Now it was Daisy at her early dusting. Sirius snuggled into himself, considering Daisy's fleshy calves, bulging from years of hard work, kneeling, and bicycling to and from the house on errands.

Before he had sufficiently prepared himself to launch an attack, however, something else diverted him.

There were in the room five or six dolls—Sirius occasionally gnawed them—and these Daisy was dusting.

On the sofa sat a very beautiful pale doll, with long golden curls, dressed in a yellow silk dress. The doll had a black satin eye-patch over its right eye. It was Edwige.

Edwige did not move.

Daisy dusted carefully all about Edwige, and eventually there Edwige was, directly before her, motionless and smooth as china.

"Just give this one a dust," said Daisy in a nasty loud false voice. "Tweak its curls, make it nice."

The doll—Edwige—did not move, or speak.

Even Sirius was surprised. Daisy flapped out her duster and gave the perfect face a vicious cleansing swipe.

Edwige did not remonstrate. Only one thing happened. The black eye-patch was dislodged on to her cheek.

"There now, I've shifted its patch," said Daisy. "Well, well. Which eye did it go over? Let me see."

Again no response from Edwige.

Daisy meditated aloud.

"I should say it was the left eye had it, the blue one. Yes. I should really say that."

And with nimble sewing fingers, Daisy adjusted the eye-patch over the

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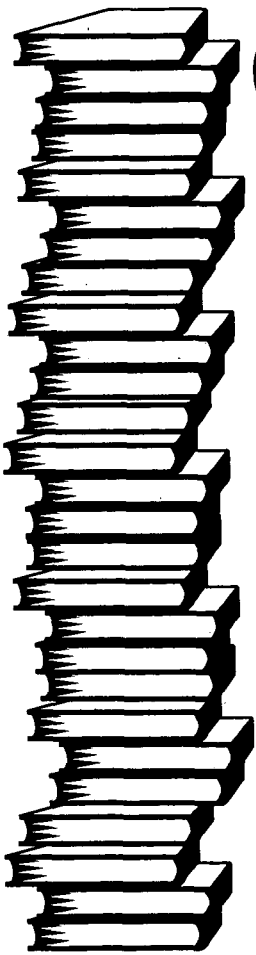

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blue eye, and there the other one was, the right eye, tawny as an acorn and bright as glass, staring out.

Sirius did not know what possessed him, but it did. He gave a strangled yelp and bolted from the room.

Agatha turned to Margaret over their luncheon of mutton and boiled potatoes.

"Edwige is so silent today."

"She was silent yesterday. In fact, all week."

"Edwige," said Agatha, "how do you like your lunch?"

But Edwige never answered questions. She picked at her plate daintily, as the sisters had taught her, but without appetite.

"Shall we go for a walk in the woods?" asked Agatha. "The berries are out. Such a pretty red."

Edwige did not answer questions.

Margaret said, "Eat up your meat, Edwige. It will make you strong. It will improve your hair."

"There is apple tart to follow," tempted Agatha.

Edwige did not speak.

The sisters regarded her cautiously, as they had been coming to do through the silent week. Was the child moody? Sickening for something? Was there something different about her?

During the walk in the wood, each held one of her hands. They crunched through the last of the crisp fallen leaves, but Edwige saw things they did not, the dead pheasant in the bracken, the yellow spider on the elm tree, the slimy black burrow of some unknown beast.

Returning, they took tea in the sitting room. Sirius did not come, as usual, huffing and puffing, for his share of buns and seed-cake.

"Where can he be?" asked Agatha. She called him nervously. But Sirius was in the attic under a sewing table, grumbling to himself.

At nine o'clock that night when, after a light supper, of which neither Sirius nor Edwige partook, the sisters accepted from Daisy their hot milk, and ascended to bed, the silence had gathered thickly on everything. In speaking they had seemed to have to wade through it, or cut their way, as men had done in the jungle forests of their extreme youth.

On the landing by the bedrooms they lingered. The uncertain electric light gave a feeble flickering glow, reminding them of oil lamps and candles.

"Do you remember the tales the old women used to tell us?" asked Agatha.

"Yes," said Margaret. "Something made me think of them."

"Of curious creatures found in the forests," said Agatha.

They hesitated, recalling other nights of mosquito-netting and huge

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moths, the sound of insects and frogs, enormous snakes which laid their eggs under the vast and twisted tree in the garden.

They parted uneasily, and each sat upright in her bed, with the bedside light burning. Margaret tried to read a book and Agatha to do a little crochet. But their thoughts strayed.

Both fell asleep sitting upright in this way, and dreamed of running through the jungle in the hot, wet days, pursued by shadows and serpents, while weird birds clicked and piped in the black leaves overhead.

As for Edwige in her narrow white bed, with the lace trim on the pillows, whether she slept or not went unknown.

Margaret said to Agatha, "Something has altered. Edwige is different. Do you see? Her eye has changed color."

Agatha clasped her hands to her throat.

"Has it really?"

"Yes. Now it is brown like the other one."

The sisters shook their heads and watched Edwige as she moved oddly about the terrace. Her hair was thin and she had got fatter. She had been a graceful child, but now she bobbed and wove as she walked.

"It is some game," said Margaret, "she is pretending to be something."

"But what?"

"I cannot say."

They stared at Edwige. Vague stirrings of the previous night filled their brains, snakes' eggs, birds calling. . . .

"She is being a ballerina," said Agatha.

The winter closed upon the house.

The white oaks were draped in ice and mist thick as leaves. The stream froze to immovable glass.

Sirius clumped about the upper house, snuffling and furious, not often coming down. When Edwige entered a room, Sirius slunk out of it.

Agatha and Margaret sat at breakfast, and the child sat with them.

"What is that on your skin, dear?" said Agatha.

Edwige, as ever, did not answer.

Despite hot chocolate and muffins and new dresses, Edwige had not spoken for a long while. Her tawny eye gleamed like a polished goblet. There was about her a faint, faint musty smell.

"Look," whispered Agatha.

"Yes," said Margaret. "We must send Daisy for the doctor. It is some sort of eczema."

But they did not send for the doctor. Perhaps a light cream would get rid of the affliction?

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Daisy in the kitchen said to the cook: "That child's skin is covered by feathers!"

"There," said the cook.

Sirius was lying on Agatha's bed, to which now he seldom ventured.

He had been snoring in exhausted sleep, for his journeys from the attics wore him out. His nose was buried in the coverlet, and now and then his back twitched irritably, for his ingress had left partially open the draughty bedroom door.

First light had come, and in the garden the harsh winter birds were trying their throats. The frozen stream did not sound, and on the windows, visible through cracks in the curtains, frost patterned the panes.

The faintest different noise disturbed the nearly silent room.

Agatha did not wake, but Sirius, with a bellicose snort, choked into awareness.

Uneasily he lifted his head and glanced about.

At first nothing seemed to him to be amiss.

The fat furniture and host of curios were in their proper places. A few dolls lay here and there in chairs, holding fans and purses. However, one doll had got up on to the dressing-table. It perched above the bowl of powder and the jars of lavender essence. It was Edwige.

Somehow the child had got on the dressing-table in a single light leap. Her arms were held out stiffly from her body. They looked stubby and thick. Edwige's shape too seemed to have altered. She was bottom-heavy, but her legs, in their white stockings, were very thin.

She peered at the bed.

Sirius froze in horror. He waited for Edwige to spring upon him. Then he saw by the position of her poked-forward head, that her glassy yellow eye was fixed on Agatha.

Sirius was ignorant of many words, such as Walk, Sit, or No. Another word he did not have was Loyalty.

Seeing that Edwige had not got *him* in her sights, he sidled quickly along the bed, flopped to the floor, and bundled out of the room.

On the stairs he skittered, and finding a door ajar below, squashed through and rushed from the house.

In the garden, a chilling howl broke from his mouth, surprising, indeed terrifying him.

Sirius sprinted for the woods.

It was, though, his parting scream that finally roused Agatha.

She had been dreaming of the jungle again, and that she lay on her back among the gnarled shrubs, while in the canopy above, something perched and stared down on her.

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Then she realized that she was quite awake, and a creature was certainly poised above her, staring.

She did not know it for Edwige.

Agatha too let out a piercing shriek.

And Edwige, with a peculiar hopping, flapping motion, bounded from the dressing-table and on to the floor, landing with a scrabbling sound. She too darted from the room.

As Margaret rushed in, Agatha sat clutching her bedclothes.

"It had such a long nose!" she cried. "It was bald!"

"Some bad dream," said Margaret.

"No, no, it was a monstrous bird. It was about to peck out my eyes!"

After some ten minutes, when Agatha was more calm, Margaret went dubiously to Edwige's room. The room was empty and the bed unslept in. The window stood wide, and outside the apple tree patently led down into the frigid garden.

The sisters searched in vain for Edwige, and less urgently for Sirius. Neither was to be found.

It was mooted that Daisy might seek the police in the village, but the day was very cold, and the lanes very slippery, and nothing came of the suggestion.

The winter passed slowly and the spring arose with mud and crocuses, and all about the trees let out a sigh of green.

The sisters did not drive through the lanes, but kept to the house. Sometimes they spoke of when the child had been with them. But they mentioned her as if she were a favorite doll that had got broken.

Occasionally on fresh spring nights, they heard a dog barking in the woods. But Agatha no longer called from the windows, for no one came.

Summer arrived, and the year turned over into lateness. A golden haze lay on the woods, and often came the sound of guns.

One evening, two men drove up to the old house, and approached the door warily.

Daisy led them into the drawing room.

Agatha rose in alarm.

"Is it bad news?"

"I am afraid it is, ladies," said the stouter man, holding his hat and shifting from foot to foot. "I was firing at the birds, when your pet ran out. I admit the fault was mine. I was never quick enough, or too quick, I fancy. I shot the poor thing, and it fell dead directly."

"It was never Charlie's fault," chimed in the other. "For that thing should never have been out, running wild."

"We absolve you," said Margaret stiffly.

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The men looked nervous.

They went to get the corpse, and Agatha murmured sadly, "Poor Sirius."

Presently the men were back, carrying a large bundle wrapped in a car rug. This they spread out reverently before the ladies, who gazed unspeaking.

The men left them to their sorrow.

On the drive, the belligerent one said, quite low, "Funny old girls. Having a pet like that, horrible thing, and dressing it up in a yellow silk dress and an eye-patch. Senile, the pair of them, if you ask me."

After an interval, Margaret spoke.

"Perhaps it was for the best."

Agatha dabbed her eyes.

They, or rather the strong Daisy, at their instruction, dug a hole, and buried Edwige in the garden, close to the stream. The child was barely recognizable, covered in feathers, her arms quite changed, her long nose pointing up and up. To the last, until the final sod fell, her sherry-colored right eye glared out at them, fixed as a marble.

Some hours later, Sirius returned to the house. His winter, spring and summer in the woods had made him leaner and furrier, and less inclined to bite anything but food. He had learned to be quiet, and he did not salivate. He, at least, had been bettered by his experience, and a good bath and powdering soon put him exactly right.

That evening at supper, the sisters had all the dolls removed from the table. The curtains were drawn fast. Soon the autumn leaves would fall, and cover the inauspicious grave of Edwige. ●

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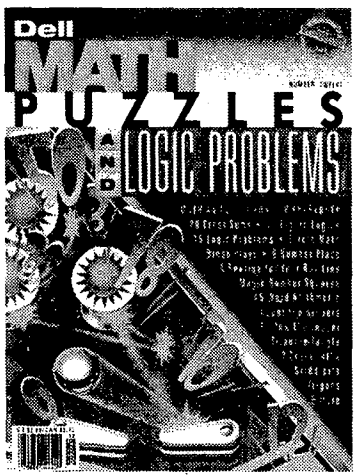

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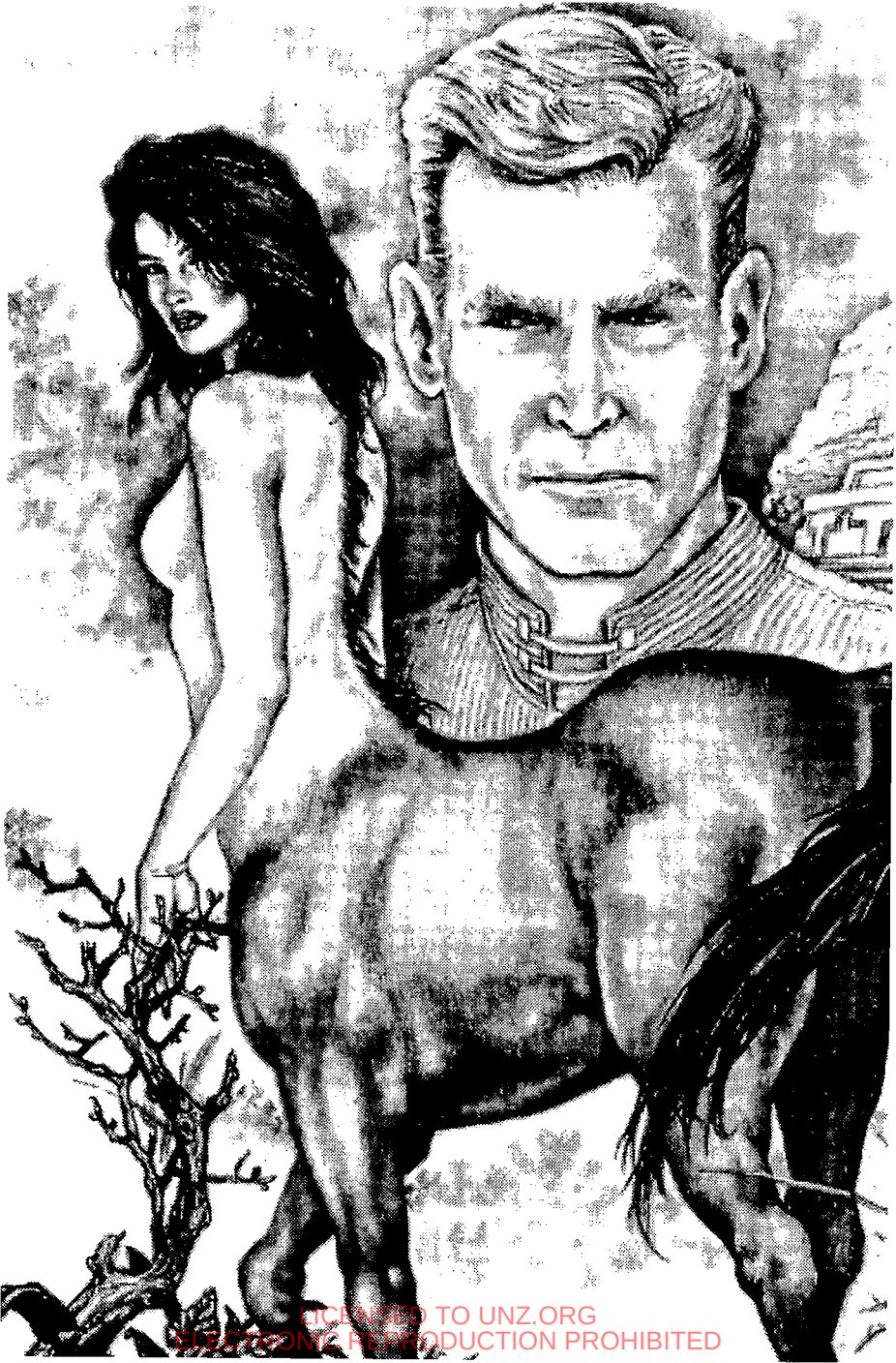

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Lonzo took the mag-lev out of the city. It was crowded at first, jammed with men and women going from apartment to job, or from job to play. Dressed as brightly as tropical birds in city colors, their faces were private and unreadable. Virtual faces, he thought, never mind that they were flesh. The real person was safely out of reach behind that mask. The music of it began to form in his head—rich, complex strings, hidden beneath a bright melodic surface. He leaned back in his seat as the mag-lev slid across the bridge, fingering the notes on his thigh, hearing it. It sounded good. Like it might work this time, really work.

The train slowed for the Perimeter but didn't stop on its way out of the city. It only stopped at the checkpoint on the way in—you were free to leave at any time. Lonzo stared out at the silvery thicket of tangled razor-wire that fenced the city towers. The fiberboard and scrap dwellings of Shacktown crowded right up to the wire, huddled and hopeful in grimy tones of gray and brown. Figures scurried from doorway to doorway, furtive as night animals caught out in the light. In Lonzo's head, the music segued from bright city notes to a soft melody of hoping in a minor key, punctuated with harsh notes of violence and despair, and graced with laughter, because laughter could happen even there.

It didn't quite work. He felt it, even in his head—the hole—that *absence* in his music. His fingers stilled as the train picked up speed. Lonzo reached down to touch his pack, to reassure himself with the hard outline of his muse-flute. Instead, he touched the roundness of his orb. He had almost left it in the apartment, cut off his access to the Net, to the city. To Roberto and Caryl, Jess, Sondra . . . all of them. But he'd told himself it was valuable, that he could sell it if he needed money.

His touching the orb instead of his flute felt like an omen.

He would never come back to the city.

"Never," he said, out loud. But the word—so strong this morning—was nothing more than air now, shaped by tongue and lips and teeth. The orb had sucked away its power.

Lonzo sighed and drowsed, the music in his head muted now, too soft to hear. He had been afraid to look at the other passengers before, afraid that he might recognize a face, or, worse yet, watch a face recognize him. But the car was almost empty now. The bird-bright city folk had gotten off, and the thin scatter of men and women who were left wore the conservative and functional earth-toned clothes of ag-plex workers.

He had never gone much with 'plexers. They didn't come into the city often, and it cost too much to travel beyond the Perimeter. In fact, he had never crossed it.

Until today.

Beyond the window, bio-mass bushes carpeted the land, a blur of dark

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green up close, their thriving branches and the black snakes of the irrigation hoses distinct and clear only at a distance. Life was like that, Lonzo thought sleepily. You only saw it clearly at a distance, when it was behind you or ahead of you. Up close, it was nothing but a blur.

Two or three at a time, the 'plexers got off, and finally, the car was empty. Lonzo sat up now, nudging his pack from beneath his seat, a tremolo of excitement in his head. The next stop, he told himself. The next stop should be his. The train was slowing, the rhythm of its speed altering, vibrating through the car, shaping the music to fit it. He didn't really know if Dyke had been straight with him about how to get into the Preserve. She liked to lie, even to her friends. Maybe this whole trip was all for nothing, maybe it was a good thing he hadn't thrown away his orb.

Going back to the city would be suicide. That was the truth, he realized, and it pierced him. Not a death of the flesh, maybe, but *something* would die, some part of him. Lonzo reached for his pack, suddenly terrified that he'd miss the stop. He slung it awkwardly over his shoulder, wondering why it seemed so much heavier now than when he'd boarded. Maybe because it held Roberto, and Caryl, Sondra, and Jess, and Than, his current string. They were all there inside his orb, and maybe it wasn't *weight* he felt, it was them pulling on him, trying to drag him back.

He almost dropped it, left it there on the seat for anybody to steal. You can have them, he thought bitterly, I don't want them. He never had, for all that they wanted *him*. But his flute was in there, too, and the mag-lev had stopped, and there wasn't time to get it out. In a fever of panic, Lonzo ran down the aisle, pack banging his hip. Heart pounding, he leaped off the step onto the platform.

Behind him, the doors whispered shut, and the mag-lev drifted on to other destinations, other cities. The sun clubbed him, hotter and brighter than in the city, where the tower-mounted solar arrays seemed to suck away the sun's power. Shading his eyes, dazzled in spite of his UV-protective contacts, he looked around. Not much—just a concrete pad at ground level cracked by heat and frost, a tile roof supported on two pillars. A few derelict houses, a couple of boarded-up stores, and a gas station lined a short section of street. A *closed* sign creaked from the gas station. At either end of town, the road ended in a wall of dusty green bio-mass bushes. Nobody had lived here for a long time.

It was an ag-plex stop; private access masquerading as a public stop and built with public funds. He didn't care, because the Preserve was . . . there. It fenced off the horizon beyond the bushes—a taller wall of green, random, not orderly like the city or the fields. The mag-lev rail arched gracefully up onto concrete pylons, ran into that forest-wall, straight as a thrown spear.

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So far, Dyke was right. No gate, no guards, no wire. Looked like you could walk along the mag-lev track right into the Preserve. He shouldered his pack and started off. At first, he stayed close to the pylons. The ground was bare brown dirt, and he felt unaccountably hesitant, even if the sun made him sweat. On either side, the trees fenced the right of way with a solid wall of green, their branches thick and disappointingly regular. He wanted chaos—not the defeated ruins of former order like Shacktown, but something truly random. Uncontrolled and uncontrollable. It was there beyond the wall of trees. He breathed, tasting it; pungent, spicy, dank, with a hint of mold and a musky whiff of living things. Forest. Wildness. He wanted to *play* it, but that hesitancy extended even to his music. So he left his flute in his pack.

Ahead, a small stream crossed the right-of-way, tumbling over gray stones. That sudden urgency squeezed him again, like it had at the Perimeter. He left the pylons, shoved head-down into the thicket of branches, following the stream. He closed his eyes as needled twigs whipped his face. Scratches—it was an automatic wince. That kind of damage would cost him an afternoon on bio-enhanced healing, because in the world of perfect virtual bodies, you couldn't afford any physical damage to the flesh, unless it was esthetic. Not in his trade.

But that didn't matter any more, and he lifted his head, reveling in the rake of twigs across his cheeks, the sting of sweat in the scratches as he burst through into twilight.

Yes. He wandered slowly between huge tree trunks that were without pattern or order, leaning sometimes, healthy, dying, and in between. Twigs and fallen branches littered the needled ground and the air hung heavy beneath the trees, thick with forest-smell, almost too thick to breathe. Overhead, the treetops swayed as an unfelt wind struck them, filling the air with a susseration that was frighteningly loud. Storm coming? Lonzo tilted his head up to the sky, trying to read it, exhilarated by the sudden gray. In the city, you ignored the sky. Sometimes it provided a little variety or an annoyance in the form of rain when you wanted sun. Out here, it had tangible power.

The forest was empty, filled only by wind noise and the smell of rotting needles. Lonzo set his pack down slowly, gooseflesh bumping up on his skin as he fumbled the flap open. Took out his flute. His gloves felt clammy as he put them on, and he lifted the featureless tube of the flute tenderly. Gray sky full of threat and energy, trailing wisps of graygreen moss stirring in the heavy air—he began to play it. Human breath provided the core sound—a living thing, breath. His gloved hands caressed the flute, each tiny movement of the flesh a new sound or instrument, all overlaid on that moist, warm stream of life.

Low voices of obo and bassoon sang the thick air, the dark patient age

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of the big firs. The stream tumbled though in strings and percussion, and the storm tension built in woodwinds and in the high clear voice of the flute itself. Lonzo let himself go, swaying to the twining rhythms, dissolving into the music. The flute was his refuge after he had been with one of *them*. He could play the sky, so clean and blue above the city. Playing, he too would be clean for awhile, safe and remote from the hungry yearning people around him.

The music still wasn't right. Not even out here. Something bounced off his shoulder, and Lonzo's start crashed dissonance through the storm-song. A fir cone. Lonzo stared at it, lowering the flute. Disappointment and silence flowed in around him like cold water. He had thought it would work out here, had thought the city—so structured, so created—had been the wound. Suddenly, Lonzo felt *alone.*

He hadn't been alone out beneath the mag-lev track. It retained the echoes of a thousand thousand people whispering along its rail, radiated those echoes like stored heat after the sun went down. If anyone had walked beneath these ancient trees, the trees had forgotten. Or they didn't care. No human hand had planted them or shaped them. Why should they care? He wrapped the flute in its velvet cloth, his fingers trembling suddenly. The pack tipped as he stowed it, and his orb rolled out. It bumped gently against his toe, heavy, shimmering with *their* invisible presence.

Lonzo reached, his hands moving without volition, fumbling his gloves from the pack, pulling them on. The holo-field shimmered to life as he touched the orb, velvet-purple. Bright images glowed in the twilight-colored field. A blood-colored rose. A tiny eagle. A golden scorpion. The rose was Mei Li's icon. Than was the eagle. The scorpion was Roberto's bit of posturing. There were others: Caryl's butterfly, Sondra's jade dragon—a constellation of need and pleading. Lonzo stared at them, tugged by temptation. *Lonzo, don't go. Who will come to the park with me?*

I need you to read to me, how can I live without hearing your voice?

I love you. How can you just walk away?

I love you.

I love you.

I love you.

He could hear their voices, even though he hadn't accessed their messages. Lonzo covered his ears, trying to block out Than's soft lisp that he thought was so sexy, Sondra's clipped Aussie accent, Roberto's sweet baritone. *I love you.* Their cries drowned the music in his head, and he should have left it behind, the orb, but he hadn't, and it didn't matter, they'd follow him always, as close as any Net terminal, as close as weakness. If he reached out, if he touched any one of those message-icons. . . .

He would no longer be alone.

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The light was failing and the wind-noise filled the forest with emptiness. His fingers twitched, reached. He balled both hands into fists, shoved them between his knees. If he listened to their cries and pleading in his e-mail, he would go back.

Lightning sizzled across the sky, bright and blue, too fast to really see. And then thunder, a splitting *crack* that made him jump. Electricity pulsed through his flesh, as if the lightning was building inside him, making his short hair prickle on his head, as if *he* was full of the lightning. Any second now, it would leap from his skin, arc to the tree, and blow it apart. Caryl talked about lightning when she talked about being in love with him. And Than—he called it electrical. The orb had blanked, had vanished in the gathering darkness, but they were still there, he could *hear* them, louder than the storm's music.

With a cry, Lonzo leaped against the trunk of the big tree. The bark shredded his palms, and the pain was like sex, pleasure and hurt together. His boots slipped, and he kicked them off, climbing like he was made for this, toes gripping the bark like it was flesh, like he was a kid climbing into his mother's arms, only if he'd even had a mother—and everyone had one, right?—she was lost in a sea of whispering faces, Than, and Caryl, and Jeff, and Ziporah, all whispering *I love you, I love you. . . .* They drowned the music in his head, and it didn't work anyway, not even out here. All that remained was the sound of their pleading —and the storm.

He was into the branches now, hands sticky with sap or blood, needles pricking his face, twigs clawing at his shoulders. The tree swayed with the wind and his weight, and suddenly he was at the top. Some past gust had broken it, left jagged splinters and a few thin branches jutting into the air. He wrapped his legs around the spindly trunk, let go, and reached up to the storm's belly.

It didn't love him, that storm, didn't hate him, didn't care, any more than the forest did. It didn't *need* him. Lightning forked the sky, blue-white and clean, so clean. Thunder crashed almost at the same instant. That meant it was close—old knowledge swimming up out of the past that had disappeared beyond the sea of faces. "Come on!" he cried, reaching. "Come get me!" Electric orgasm without love or need. Nothing would matter—not the hole in his music, not the whispers on the Net, *I love you, I love you. . . .* "Come *on!*" He reached, fingers spread, the tree's flesh bending and swaying between his thighs.

Bright blindness sizzled around him, exploded with a sound like the sky splitting. I'm dead, he thought. But pain stung his face and chest—splinters from the blasted crown of a taller tree—and he felt an instant of terrible disappointment. Then he was sliding, tumbling down,

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dropping through the tree's crown, nails tearing as he clutched automatically for a grip, twigs slashing his face, branches battering his ribs, arms, legs. And suddenly there were no branches, and he was falling in blackness, and rain, and a shower of needles and twigs.

He landed hard and soft at the same time, fell into pillowing darkness, into a dream of their smiles, a hundred different faces, sucking the life from him, fingers gently shredding the flesh from his bones. . . . He tried to pull away, but his lips returned their smiles, and his hands clasped theirs, fleshless and without power, the music silent in his head.

He woke chilled and stiff to green light and birdsong. Sun shone, not hot yet, spangling the needled branches far above his head with droplets of glittering crystal. He moved, sucking in a ragged breath at soreness and bruising. Fabric rustled. Blinking, he sat up, pushing aside a covering of pale green. It was tucked beneath him and half over him, and he shivered as it fell away. It had kept him more dry than not.

Stiffly, gracelessly, he got to his feet. His covering was some kind of rain poncho, sleeved and oddly proportioned. It was too long in the back, long enough to drag on the ground like a train if he put it on. Lonzo folded it, adding this puzzle to the puzzle of who had wrapped him in it. His pack had been tucked between the roots of the big fir from which he'd fallen. It was soaked, and he dropped to his knees on the sodden needles, cold water soaking through his leggings, afraid for his flute. The velvet wrap was damp, and so were his gloves. He pulled them on, and picked up the flute.

The first notes were sharp and sweet with his relief. No damage. Squatting beneath the dripping tree, he caught the tone of the strengthening light, brought in strings, a percussive whisper of leaves as the morning breeze sprang up, embroidered it with bright birdsong and the sparkle of sun on falling drops. He was trying too hard to close the hole. His shoulders drooped, music going dissonant, bruised muscles aching from his squat, faint and hungry. Sparrows fluttered at his feet and he kicked at them, the music dissonant with his anger as they scattered.

And felt . . . eyes on him.

He let the flawed notes trail away like mist, searching the shadows between the gray trunks, seeing nothing at first but a chaos of undergrowth and bark, clumps of dark sword fern. And then, as if someone had turned a spotlight on her, he saw her. She stood on the bank of the stream, watching him. Her hair was black, and her torso was lithe beneath the sleeveless shirt she wore. But where her hips should be, her waist flared into the shoulders of a black horse. She swished her long tail against her flanks and stamped one equine hoof.

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Centaur, he thought numbly. And then: there are no such things. "What the hell *are* you?" he asked.

She grimaced, and, in a single smooth motion, she pulled her shirt off over her head, revealing the soft suggestion of ribs beneath her tawny skin, and small breasts with dark nipples. "Try *who,* not *what.*" Her eyes dared him to look away. "Why don't you get the staring over with? And ask anything you need to ask, okay?" She raised her chin, her dark eyes steady in spite of her blush. "Then we won't keep bumping into all those questions."

The flicker deep in her eyes gave her hurt away. And so he stared—because she wanted him to stare. "I apologize," he said. "About the *what.* I thought genens were illegal."

"You didn't get the death sentence for human gene manipulation when I was made. And Uncle paid the fine. He could afford it." She shrugged and turned, so that he could see everything.

Her black hair hung down her back, mixing with an equine mane that began like down between her shoulderblades, grew steadily thicker and longer as it descended her spine to her equine shoulders. Plumbing was a horse thing, he decided. Sex, too. Sixteen? Did she age like a horse or a girl? he wondered. She had stopped blushing as she turned, her hooves lifting daintily. But not quite gracefully. There was a hitch in her movements, like a sour note in a perfect piece of music.

He spotted the faint outline beneath the satiny black hide of her withers. Buried hardware. And also there, below her breasts, and in front of what would be her hips if she were human, and probably elsewhere, because how else could you coordinate all that muscle? He recoiled, repelled in spite of himself.

And she saw. Turned her head, her profile stark against the tree shadow, sparrows fluttering around her. "It didn't work." She pulled her shirt back on. "They thought it would, all the people who worked on me. But I couldn't walk. They did the surgery when I was four and implanted the hardware." She looked at him, her face harsh with truth. "I'm a failure. Ugly. But Uncle loves me anyway. You know, I thought you were a girl at first. Or a kid. But you're not."

His reaction had hurt her, so he forgave her quick, scathing words. "I should let my beard grow," he said, although he'd tried and it never did. Lonzo crossed the space between them and put a hand on her equine shoulder. Her head was nearly a meter above his, and her skin shuddered beneath his palm, but she didn't move away. Up close, he realized how big her human torso was. She looked right—in proportion with her horse self—but if she were fully human, she'd be a giant. She kept her face

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averted as he traced the outline of the hardware, feeling sleek horsehair, solid flesh, and buried plastic. Her strong animal scent—not unpleasant at all—tickled his nose, overlaid by a hint of musky woman-smell. "It's all right," he said, letting his hand linger. "It doesn't really bother me, you know."

And realized that he was *doing* it, just like he'd done with Than, and Jess, and Mei Li, and all the others. Not trying to do it, just *doing* it—the lingering touch, that sense of awareness, his skin warming as he breathed her scent. In a few minutes, he'd start to perspire, never mind the morning chill. He would sense what she wanted him to say, say it for her. It would happen like it always did. He jerked his hand away as if she had burned him, and she shied a little, hooves scattering rotted needles, startled.

"Did you cover me up?" He made his voice harsh, accusatory. It took a lot of effort to be harsh, because she didn't want that, and it was so much easier to give her what she wanted. "Did you do that much and then just walk away, leave me to live or die there in the rain?"

"You didn't seem to be dying." She stamped one rear hoof. "Do you know what the penalty is for trespass on a Preserve? You were sort of conscious for a little bit. Don't you remember? You said you were okay, told me to go away." She shook her hair impatiently back over her shoulder. "Nothing seemed to be broken, so I gave you my poncho. *You* wrapped yourself up. Or would you rather I'd called somebody? You'd be in jail, or on your way to a community service camp by now."

"I'm sorry. I . . . don't remember." He retreated, embarrassed. "Thank you."

"I listened to you play, yesterday. And this morning." She lay down, awkward and animal, folding her legs beneath her. Now she was shorter than he, looking up at him. "Can I see your flute?"

He unwrapped it, suddenly shy, and handed it over. She put on the gloves and raised it to her lips, eyes dreamy, hair and mane mixing and lifting in the fitful breeze. Her notes were clear as rain, graced with rich woodwinds like tree-shade and the bright chirp of birds. The sparrows answered her, fluttering down to peck among the needles in front of her. Maybe sparrows were the only birds who lived in this place, Lonzo thought.

She broke off suddenly. "Here." She handed the flute back reverently. "I only play for myself.

"Why?" Which was a silly thing to say, since he only played for himself. "You're good."

"Good, yes. Not great. Not like you." Serious expression, serious tone. "Will you play something?"

Great, she had said. He raised the flute, played the stream for awhile,

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all bright with sun and white cascading water. And ended abruptly, thirsty.

"Why did you come here?" Her eyes seemed to be all pupil, black as night in the shadows. "You're lucky, you know." She tossed her head again, like a horse might. "If I hadn't been surfing through Uncle's security, I wouldn't have seen you in time to delete you from the record. You'd be on your way to a camp right now."

Security? He looked up, startled, into the wild canopy above them, but if video-eyes watched them, he couldn't spot them. "Thank you," he said stiffly, a little irritated by her supercilious manner, a little angry because he hadn't wanted to know that city technology compromised this wild place. "I came here because I felt like it." He shrugged. "I was sick of the city."

"How were you going to live?"

"I don't know." He polished a speck of mud from the flute, not looking at her. Somebody always took care of him. It startled him that she would even ask. "I'll figure something out."

"What?" She wouldn't leave it alone. "Are you going to live here like some kind of crazy hermit? Are you going to eat nuts and berries? Catch rabbits?"

"I don't know. You own this forest or what?" His anger burst out, startling her.

Her equine shoulders tensed, as if she was about to lunge to her feet. "I don't own the forest." She sank down again, but her eyes were serious in spite of her smile. "I call it my garden, but that's only because nobody owns it. Nobody *made* it this way, so I love it."

That's what had drawn him—that this place hadn't been built or planted, hadn't been *made*. Lonzo's anger evaporated and he blew a soft apology on the flute.

She nodded, understanding. "What did you do in the city? Play music?"

She didn't guess, but why would she? She was no city child. *I play music.* He almost gave her that lie, spun her a story of live entertainment and noble poverty. He was already responding to her, reading the tiny clues of body language—at least of her human part—sweating lightly.

But the forest mattered to her for the same reason it mattered to him. And she heard what he played in his music, and suddenly he didn't want to lie to her. "I'm a whore." The words came out harsh and ugly.

For the space of a single heartbeat, she stared at him. Then she laughed, but her laugh was uncertain. "A whore? How can you make a living at *that,* when people can do virtual sex with anyone or anything?"

He shrugged, and began to wrap the flute. A small part of him was pleased that he'd shocked her, that he'd jarred the familiar progression out of step. "Anyone can do sex, you're right." He smiled at her. "Love is

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something different. It's a living thing." Like his breath in the flute, never mind the electronics that augmented it. "I can make anyone fall in love with me. Even you." For a price. Always a price. "Nobody's been able to put *that* into a virtual yet—love." A lot of times, sex wasn't even part of it. Sex was easy. Cheap. He lifted one shoulder in a lopsided shrug, shaped a leer that felt ugly. "It's a living."

"That's why you tried to die last night?" she asked softly.

Tried to die, not "tried to kill yourself." He looked away from the dark intensity of her stare. "They always pay," he said softly. "Sometimes I don't even have to ask. And they never want me to go, but I always do, after awhile. They beg me to stay. Sometimes, they threaten suicide." Who had done that last? Jeff, or Mei Li? He couldn't remember. "I don't think they ever really do it," he said. Who would die for him? "I don't want to know."

"Why?" She touched his arm, eyes wide, her fingers light as the brush of the tender needles at the top of the tree last night. "Why can't you love them back?"

Her words startled him again. "I do," he said. "I give them what they want." He turned deliberately to meet her eyes, searching for the disgust that had to be there. "You'll love me and you'll get me a job with your uncle, feed me, dress me, just to keep me. And I'll be everything you want me to be."

"Is that what love is?" She tilted her head, frowning softly. "I don't know. I don't know at all." She got to her feet in a lunging surge of mass and muscle, hooves thumping hollow on the ground. "I don't think Uncle will give you a job." She tilted her head in a measuring stare. "But he'll let me feed you breakfast. And you need to put something on those scratches."

"I'm fine." But her words brought stinging pain, as if she'd reminded his flesh of its injuries. He looked at his arms, noticing the red welts and the stripes of crusted brown blood for the first time. "Sort of fine, anyway."

"You should see your face." She turned, swinging her hindquarters carefully so that she didn't bump him. "Come on."

He could see it clearly now—a roughness as she moved, a physical dissonance. It was part of her, not ugly, not alien. Just . . . her. "You're so beautiful," he blurted.

"Except for my limp." She rolled an eye at him. "You blush so prettily. Is it on purpose?"

"I'm not blushing." He glowered at her, then laughed. "And it's not really a limp, you know. More like . . . a syncopation. I don't even know your name." He grinned up at her. "I'm Lonzo."

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"Ailene." She looked down at him, ducking beneath a branch, her expression a mixture of wariness and curiosity. "What's so funny?"

"You're not falling in love with me. I can feel it. And part of me is *pissed!*" He laughed again, but it tasted bitter this time. "Maybe I don't really know what I want after all."

"Maybe we never do." She swished her long tail and broke into a trot.

But when he didn't run to keep up, she slowed down to wait for him. When he caught up with her, she offered to carry his pack. He handed it to her.

Apology offered and accepted. He wasn't at all sure who owed whom the apology, or why.

The house was closer than he'd thought. Built against a line of gray cliffs, it hung above a small tumbling stream that cascaded down through a crack in the cliff-face. It was built of weathered concrete the color of stone, shaped all in curves that harmonized subtly with the curves of the hillside. For a few moments, he could only stand and stare, stunned by the unity of that architecture. It belonged here, jutting out of the rimrock in multiple levels as if it was part of the cliff.

At the same time, it stopped him, as if an invisible fence blocked his path. He hadn't thought about who would live in a Preserve. Of course it would be the most wealthy, the topmost layer of the economic strata. A sparrow fluttered onto the path at his feet, chirped a bright note. Uncle could afford the fine for illegal genen work. He looked sideways at Ailene. "I don't know. . . ." he began.

"Are you scared of him?" She cocked one rear leg, challenge in her eyes.

"No." He took his pack from her, slung it over his shoulder. "I'm not scared of him. I just . . ." He shrugged, because it was too late to retreat anyway. This man would have security out to the rim of the Preserve. Although he'd been looking in every treetop for hidden video eyes and hadn't seen a single one. No wonder his music hadn't worked. This place wasn't so different from the city after all. He hiked the pack higher. "Let's go," he said, and sighed.

She led him toward the south end of the sprawling cliff-house. Up close the place was huge, with vast windows and wide doors. Big enough for a centaur. "This is where I live," she said as she clomped up a ramp onto a stone-flagged terrace.

Plants cascaded from glazed pots, spilling clusters of tiny blue and white flowers over the rail. The stream tumbled below, full of foam and music. French doors opened into a huge suite. There were a couple of chairs, and a table that was too high for him. And a wide couch at floor level, with a low table beside it. A laptop reader lay on the table. Ailene

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threw open the doors. "Bathroom is there." She pointed to an archway. "If you can handle the proportions."

This was another challenge, this invitation into her rooms. Challenges were playful things, masks for deeper questions. *I love you. Do you love me, Lonzito? That* was the usual question, but this time it didn't fit, and it left him uneasy, treading warily on unfamiliar ground. "Thanks." He tossed his pack onto the couch as casually as if he lived here—answering her challenge—and went into the bathroom.

It was as big as an ordinary room, with a walk-in shower closet large enough for her to stand in, a sink built to her height. The toilet had been designed for equine plumbing. Lonzo eyed the narrow rectangular pool and was glad he only had to urinate. The mirror above the sink showed him his scratches, and he winced. Some of them looked bad enough to scar. But it didn't matter any more.

It was hard to remember that. He stripped off his tunic, ran water, and washed his face, bringing bright new blood to the worst of his injuries.

"This'll help." She stood in the doorway, a small plastic container in her hand.

Out among the trees, she had fit. In here, in this house, she looked out of place, never mind the centaur-sized features that had been proportioned for her. "He built this whole place for you, didn't he?" The effect, instead of normalizing her, made her into a freak. Bare-chested, Lonzo walked past her into the main room and boosted himself up onto the table. Now they were on a level. He took the container from her, sniffed at the white cream it contained.

"Yes, he built this house for me." She sounded sad. "Because he'd funded this project to do mer-type genens for the fisheries trade. And the engineer who was doing the designs was kind of a crazy genius, and he . . . did me. Just to see if he could do it, I guess." She looked away, her mouth twitching. "And then the Backlash happened, and people were rioting, killing genens, and the project was disbanded. The company that had contracted for the mers took care of them. But . . . I didn't belong to anyone. So Uncle kept me."

Kept me, she said, like you'd keep a dog. He'd built a house for her, spent a fortune to isolate her in her own uniqueness. *Just to see if he could do it,* she'd said about her creation. "That's how most of us get conceived, isn't it?" he asked softly. "On some crummy bed, or in an alley? Just to see if we can do it . . . make a life?"

"I think about it a lot." She looked away. "Are they the same thing—being born and being *made?* Or ar they different? The World Court never decided. They just passed laws to stop human genengineering. They didn't decide if we were human . . . or not. I think they're waiting for all of us genens to die of old age. Give me that." She took the container from

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him, dipped a finger into it, and began to smooth the cream into his face. "Tell me about your mother. What was she like?"

Another question to surprise him. "I don't remember." Lonzo closed his eyes, the antiseptic tingling on his cuts. "I dream about her sometimes—she was dark like me. Smiling. In my dreams, she's always dressed in white. She says 'Come on, Lonny, let's go see the doctor.' Maybe she was sick. I don't know what happened to her." Even back then, there had always been someone to take care of him—in return for love. The faces layered like fall leaves in his memory, a lot of them nameless now, covering up whatever had been before. "I guess she died when I was little."

"Uncle loves me." Ailene's murmur sounded in his ear and her breath was warm against his face."He built this house for me. He takes care of me. But I don't know. . . ." She shuddered, horse and human. "Sometimes I dream that the walls all crumble and trap me. And then the cliff falls in and crushes me."

"Maybe you should leave?"

"And go *where?*" Her words were a breath, barely audible. "And do *what,* Lonzo?"

"I don't know." Truth forced the words from him.

She nodded, her expression serene and resigned. "I think I'm unfinished," she said slowly. "I don't know what's missing."

"So is my music," he whispered. "Unfinished." It was his turn to look away.

"I heard it when you played." Her turn to be truthful. "But you're so *close.*"

Somehow her truthfulness made the hole seem smaller. Lonzo fumbled the flute from his pack. It was cool in his hand, eager as he slipped on his gloves. *You're so close.* . . . He raised it to his lips and played . . . her. He played the sweet arch of her back in a soft minor key, graced it with the wind-lifted sweep of mane and hair. Added power and muscle with kettledrums and viols, played her the syncopation of her walk and let her hear how it was beautiful. And the hole was . . . smaller.

Eyes half closed, a soft smile on her face, she leaned close. She smelled of animal and woman, of the breeze beneath the forest canopy. Lonzo let the final notes trail away and laid the flute down. He took off his gloves, raised a hand to touch her face. Her skin stretched smooth and firm over her jutting cheekbones. She laid her palm against his cheek as his hand traveled downward, following the smooth curve of her back beneath the soft fabric. Her waist was firm, blending into the sculptured muscle of her forequarters. His hand came to rest on the hard satiny swell of her equine shoulder, the hem of her shirt just brushing his knuckles, her

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flesh warm beneath his palm. So much power. So much grace. "You're like the forest," he said softly. "You *are.*"

Behind them, someone cleared their throat.

She shied like any horse, yanking him from the table. Her shoulder slammed him in the hip, knocked him nearly off his feet, and the edge of the table banged his ribs. He caught himself and straightened, holding his side.

"Uncle." She faced the door, her cheeks flaming, breathing fast. "I wondered if you were home."

"I'm home." The man in the doorway had the face and body of someone in his thirties, in his prime. Ash-blond hair, fair skin, eyes the color of the sky above the city. He was dressed in soft expensive trousers and sweater, and he nodded at Lonzo. Smiled. "I'm Sebelius Renfrew."

"Lonzo." If he'd had a surname, he'd never learned it. Or he'd lost it among the faces. "I met Ailene in the woods." He reached for his shirt and fumbled it on in the brief silence.

"He plays the muse-flute." Ailene said at last, still breathless. "He's incredibly good."

"I've always liked the flute. I was just going to have a late breakfast. Brunch, I suppose." Renfrew smiled. "Care to join me on my terrace?"

The charm was a mask, like the city-faces on the train were masks. And when Ailene said "That would be nice." she was obeying a command, for all her smile. It made him angry—that she would smile and obey. Lonzo put a hand on her shoulder, then took it away when her equine muscles bunched beneath his palm. Tense, her horse-muscles confessed. Nervous.

Her nervousness banished his own, and he smiled at Sebelius Renfrew. "Breakfast would be very nice," he said. "Or brunch. You'll have to excuse my appearance." He tucked his flute into his pack, shouldered it. "I spent the night out in the forest."

"So I gather." Renfrew gave Lonzo a thoughtful look as he stepped back to usher them out onto the terrace again, past the potted plants, and up another ramp. "You popped up rather suddenly on my security system. Must be a glitch somewhere. I've got some technicians working on it." He draped a casual arm across Ailene's satiny back. "I don't want you to worry when you're out in the woods, dear."

"I don't worry, Uncle. I'd scare any intruders away." Her tone was light, but her tail whisked her flanks. "They'd think I was a monster and run."

"Lonzo didn't run." Renfrew smiled brightly. "Don't talk like that, child. You're *lovely.*"

His tone was passionate, full of truth. But somehow, like the perfectly proportioned house, his words made her seem ugly, a monster after all.

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"And you're sweet, Uncle," Ailene murmured. They had come to a small arched bridge of polished wood, and she broke into a trot, her hooves shaking the planks as she crossed it. Lonzo and Renfrew crossed after her, side by side. Close together, because the bridge was narrow.

He had Renfrew's attention, for all the man wasn't looking at him. He was *old*. You could see the age in his movements, never mind the body-shop muscles and the expensively purchased look of youth. And Lonzo was truly young. Beautiful, in spite of the scratches. He drew a shallow breath, *tasting* the man, his skin prickling, warming. Perspiration dewed his forehead, and he smiled. Renfrew returned it. Sebelius Renfrew reacted to him, even if Ailene didn't. It was always like that. Always. Except with Ailene, and he wasn't quite sure why that was.

The bridge ended on another larger terrace. Orange trees bloomed in huge glazed pots, perfuming the air. A table of polished wood stood among cushioned chairs. It held a tray of food, and various pots. Ailene stood beside it, pouring coffee into cups. Her hair had fallen forward around her face, hiding her expression. There was no furniture designed for centaurs on this terrace, Lonzo noticed.

"Please, sit." Renfrew took the cup she offered, waved Lonzo toward another of the chairs. "So, you play the muse-flute?" He seated himself, crossed his legs, leaning back with a sexuality that tugged at Lonzo's biochemistry. "Would you consider giving a private . . . er . . . recital later?" His eyes gleamed above his pleasant smile. "Ailene's quite fond of the flute."

"I just play for myself." And maybe always would, his music forever flawed. Lonzo moved his shoulders uneasily, not sure what was bothering him. Renfrew was reacting, attracted, but there was a hint of darkness to it, like a tingle of distant lightning. If Renfrew was a prospective client, Lonzo would make his excuses. Duck and run. "I'd disappoint you," he said.

"Let me be the judge of that." Renfrew turned his smile on Ailene. "I don't demand perfection."

She averted her head—just a twitch, but there was shame in it. You *are* perfect, Lonzo wanted to say to her. That uneven walk, the satiny horse-muscle, they're *part* of you, not a lack. He accepted the cup she handed him, silent, aware of Renfrew's eyes on him. Lonzo sipped at the coffee—real, not synthetic. "I really do play only for myself," he said.

"Well, that's the only valid motivation for anything." Renfrew leaned forward, picked up a rosy apple from the tray. "Although it's nice if you can do it and make a living, too. Have some food. The smoked fish is wonderful, and the strawberries are from the greenhouse here. Very ripe. 'Lene?" He cocked one perfect eyebrow. "Have you done your lessons this morning?"

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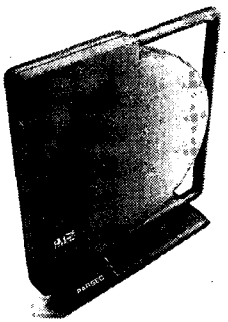

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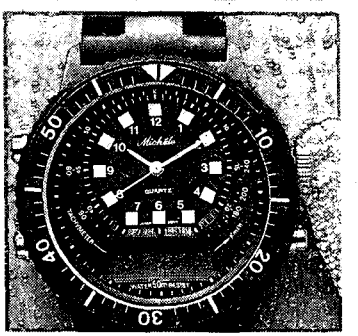

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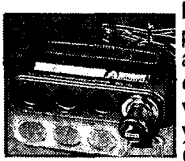

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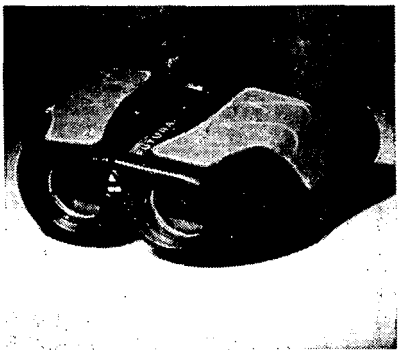

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"No, I haven't." She picked up a huge chunk of fish, trapped it between two halves of a roll. "I take it I'm supposed to go do them, right?" She scooped up a handful of strawberries, one corner of her mouth lifting into a wry smile. "I'm on my way. I'll be in my room, Lonzo." She left the terrace with the hollow clatter of hooves on stone.

She had been dismissed, and she had accepted the dismissal. Had there been a hint of sadness in her tone? As if she expected him to leave without bothering to say goodbye? Lonzo picked up three of the huge, perfect strawberries. He ate one, dizzied by the sweetness and perfume of the fruit. Obedience, he thought. That's what was different about Ailene. In this man's presence, she was *obedient*. It would be hard *not* to obey this man. The temptation tugged at him, too. Lonzo ate the second strawberry. To have this house in this place—who had he bribed for the permits to build here in the Preserve?—he *had* to be a world power, one of the top nodes in the WorldWeb. It would be foolish to be anything *but* obedient. Perhaps that was why she found her garden in the disobedient forest.

"A penny for your thoughts." Renfrew leaned forward—a little too far forward, Lonzo noticed.

"I was thinking about Ailene."

"Ah?" Renfrew's hand on his knee invited a confidence.

"She told me a designer made her. On a whim." He tossed the last strawberry in his palm, pretending to ignore Renfrew's touch. "Why? Why would he do that?"

"Is there ever a rational explanation for whimsy?" Renfrew shrugged. "He was a genius, Patrick Doyle was, and crazy, I think. He loved his work. Love." His sky-colored eyes fixed on Lonzo's face. "Love is such an undeniable thing, isn't it?"

A message beneath those seemingly casual words? "Is it?" Lonzo popped the last strawberry into his mouth. "I don't know."

"Don't you." It wasn't quite a question. Renfrew sat forward to fill his own cup, reached for Lonzo's. "He worked so hard on her, and yet she was flawed. Crippled. Patrick fixed it finally, added the hardware to accept signals from her human neural pathways and translate them into comparable movements of her equine muscles. It's a brilliant extension of the technology used to attach prosthetic limbs. I'm afraid the surgery involved was painful at times. She's had a . . . difficult childhood, and she's precious to me. The most important thing in the world." He handed Lonzo his refilled cup. "I had a daughter once. Her mother was a nobody, and she betrayed me. I don't take betrayal well." His voice went soft, and Lonzo had the sudden sense that he was saying something else, something shrill and terrible beyond the edge of hearing. "Never mind

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that." Renfrew smiled, his mood suddenly shifting. "Angelina, my daughter, was beautiful in spite of her mother. She was perfection. She was everything I'd ever wanted. Everything."

Was. . . . Lonzo looked away, because for a moment Renfrew's expression reminded him of his past lovers—glossed with a blind and terrible hunger. And something else. A flash of hatred? "What happened to her?"

"She died." Renfrew turned those city-sky eyes on him, his face charming again, unreadable as a virtual. "She used to show horses—stadium jumping. It's a dangerous sport, you know, but the young don't believe in mortality, do they? Do *you,* Lonzo? Believe in mortality?"

"Yes," Lonzo whispered. Strawberry juice had stained his fingers, red as blood. "I know I can die." *Why did you try to die?* she had asked him. Not "Why did you try to kill yourself?" There was an important difference. For a moment, he thought he had it, but then it eluded him.

"I'm glad you're aware of your own mortality, Lonzo. Unfortunately, my daughter wasn't. She died in a jumping accident. Head injury. There wasn't even time to get her onto life-support."

"I'm sorry," he said, but the words came out a mumble. His lips were numb, and the terrace had contracted to a small bright space in a shimmering fog. Drugged, he thought sluggishly and tried to get up. His bones had turned to jelly and he sagged back into his soft, comfortable seat.

"She's very lovely, Ailene." Renfrew's voice came from a long way away. "I love her very much. Do you understand? I love her very very much. And she loves me."

"I know," Lonzo heard himself murmur the words, without volition, without control. "I love her, too." And wanted to call the words back because they weren't true, couldn't be true. But it was too late.

Someone patted his face, very gently, almost tenderly. He couldn't see who it was.

He was dreaming and knew it, had fallen hard and soft out of a tree. But that didn't matter because he was riding through the dappled forest shade on Ailene's sleek back, and he didn't want it to stop. Her powerful equine shoulders rocked between his thighs and she had taken off her shirt again. Sweat gleamed on her human shoulders and her mane mingled with her hair, streaming back into his face, tickling his chest and groin. He put his hands on her slender human waist, cupped her breasts, her nipples under his fingers, his prick rising, hardening. She twisted to look over her shoulder as she galloped, face bright with laughter and lust. And he leaned forward to kiss her, his erection rubbing against horse and human heat. . . .

He woke, curled around pleasure, dream, and a piercing sense of loss. Bright light hurt his eyes, made him blink. The sun was low, tangled in

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the tops of the fir trees. This late already? He sat up, head aching, the chair cushions soft beneath him. Remembered his brunch with Sebelius Renfrew. *I love her, do you understand?* Renfrew's words echoed in his head.

A warning. Lonzo stumbled to his feet, his head pounding. Why the drug? he wondered, and had the uneasy fantasy that Renfrew had used it to look into his dream, to watch him ride Ailene through the woods. The tray of food still stood on the table. Flies buzzed on the spoiling fish; they were black with greenish wings. His pack lay on the floor beside the table. Yes, a warning, and a message. Leave now, or else. Don't even say goodbye. A fly landed on his arm, and he slapped it. It fell to the polished stones of the terrace, leaving a tiny smear of death behind on Lonzo's tawny skin.

Sebelius Renfrew could swat him like that. Nobody would care.

He grabbed his pack. It wasn't closed all the way, gaped open as he lifted it. His orb gleamed inside. Ailene must have found it when she covered him, must have put it back in his pack. He shivered, half-reached for it, jerked his hand away. No need to go back. He could go on, catch the rail from the ag-plex stop, go east or south, find some bit of forgotten land that was truly wild. Maybe there he could find a way into the hole in his music.

Ailene had looked into that hole and had understood. What would she believe if he simply walked away? That she didn't matter? She had expected him to go. How often had this scene played itself out in her life? Lonzo walked to the edge of the terrace, eyes on the tree-shadows beyond these heavy sprawling walls. Those walls had been built for her. Sanctuary or prison? He turned back, crossed the terrace with quick nervous strides, his pack banging his hip. Across the bridge, up the ramp, the route had seemed so simple, so direct, but now he noticed the connecting walkways and ramps, and faltered.

This way to her rooms? Yes. He veered right, telling himself that he was sure. It led him to a terrace with pots of blue and white flowers. Hers, he told himself, and reached for the french doors. They were locked and he paused, urgency tugging him again. He'd tried. (But she wouldn't know that). He should go. (And she'd believe he didn't give a damn). Swearing softly under his breath, he fished in his pack for the key that Dyke had given him. Thief, liar, hacker, Dyke's gifts were always functional. He pulled it out, touched it to the plate of the electronic lock. The key hummed to itself, as if happy with the challenge. The lock clicked, and he dropped the key back into his pack. Pushed the door open. And stopped dead.

This wasn't Ailene's room, and now the small uneasiness he'd felt on the terrace shouted at him. The flowers had fooled him. A luxurious bed

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took up much of the space, along with a sunken bath like a simmering pool at one end of the carpeted room. An old-fashioned wooden bar offered ranked glass bottles full of liquors, and a bowl of fruit. A entertainment-scale holo-projector, like a larger version of his orb, stood on a pedestal in front of an upholstered couch. All were human-normal size. Ailene would be totally out of place in here. *His* room, Lonzo thought. Renfrew's. On a table made from polished wood the color of ivory, static holos shimmered above their polished bases.

Common sense was screaming at him to get out, but he took a step toward the holos, another. He needed to see them, needed to see who mattered enough to this man that he kept their holos beside his bed. The carpet was as soft as the needled ground beneath the big firs. Another step. They were all of one girl, stairstepping in age from dark-haired infancy to smiling young adulthood. His daughter, of course. Angelina. No image of mother, sibling, friend. Just her: sitting, waving, smiling over her shoulder in a laughing glance that was at the same time intimate and coy. In the center, a larger image shimmered above a matte black base. Angelina leaping a frighteningly tall fence astride a black horse.

Frozen moments of the past, holos, caught and preserved forever. He'd read somewhere that primitives feared the first crude two-dee cameras, claiming that the picture captured their souls. True, Lonzo thought as he stared. We freeze our past, our loves and hates, keep them forever to torture ourselves. He swallowed, his eyes fixed on that central image.

Black hair flying like the mare's black mane, they leaped together, and she laughed, so sure of herself, so *alive*. Ailene. A fully human Ailene, astride a black mare.

If you had all the money, all the power in the world, all the access to the visionary geniuses in the sciences—you could do whatever you wanted. *She betrayed me,* Renfrew had whispered, and Lonzo had pitied the nobody who was the mother.

Maybe he hadn't meant the mother at all. *I love you.* The voices of Jeff and Sondra and the rest whispered in his head. *You've betrayed me, us, you've left us. . . .*

Death was a betrayal. His mother, who had taken him with her to the doctor, had left him long ago, vanished without a trace in a sea of strangers' faces, and strangers' love.

If you had the means, you could spend a lifetime on revenge. You could make it subtle. An artform. Or maybe not revenge. Maybe this was . . . punishment.

If the holo can steal a soul, what about a strand of DNA? What gets stolen then?

Ailene, Ailene, do you know who you are? Do you know *what* you are?

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Lonzo snatched up his pack and bolted out the door. He didn't have a clue where he was, where her room might be, could only run down the ramps and walkways and hope he'd recognize her terrace. And found it easily around the next curve of wall—found her. She was standing in the golden beams of late afternoon sun, her laptop reader balanced on the railing between two of the pots of flowers. A couple of sparrows perched on the railing at her elbow, preening themselves, cocking their heads to watch her.

"Ailene!"

Her head snapped up and she shied—because a computer buried in her flesh had translated that human start into its equine equivalent. Crippled, Renfrew had said. Flawed.

"Uncle said you'd left." She let him hear the echo of her hurt. "He said you were going to catch the mag-lev back to the city."

Renfrew knew he'd come here on the mag-lev. So Ailene hadn't diddled the security record nearly as well as she'd thought. "We need to go." He looked over his shoulder, realizing suddenly that he hadn't seen a single human being in this gigantic place except the three of them. Surely, Renfrew had a dozen servants. "We need to go right now." He set his pack down, caught her wrist.

"What are you talking about?" She arched away, her arm stretched between them in a tug of war she could win easily. "You're crazy."

"Maybe. Maybe not just *me.*" He met her dark, wary gaze, willing her to *see,* to understand. "Did you know that he had a daughter?"

"Angelina." She turned her head away. "I've lived here all my life. Do you really think I wouldn't *know?*"

She'd seen the holos. "Why did you tell me. . . ?" He shook his head fiercely, because why *should* she have told him the truth? "Never mind."

"I didn't lie to you. Patrick Doyle really *did* do the work, you know. I found the records. Uncle told me he'd . . . kept a DNA sample. That he couldn't let her go, Angelina. And Doyle used it without asking."

"Do you believe him?" Lonzo asked her softly.

"Yes." But her horse-body sidled uneasily. She lifted her chin, her eyes still avoiding his. "I know she's me. Part of me, anyway. I even know *her.* Security has always watched every square centimeter of this place. There was another house here before this one. They lived here then. He tore it down, after. I watched her jump on those old holos. She used to train in the meadow above the house. The stream runs through it in a deep ravine—the same stream you were near when I found you." She paused for a second, her eyes on a vision he couldn't share. "She was always so sure of herself. Because *he* was watching. You could see that she was showing off for him. You could see that he was scared for her, but proud of her, too."

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He? A new chill settled onto Lonzo's shoulders. "Renfrew?" he asked softly.

"No. He was tall. Dark. Her lover, right? He had to be, or he wouldn't have watched the way he did, all full of fear when she jumped fences, but not showing it, you know? He was in love with her. And she was so *sure*. . . ." Her eyes were still fixed on that vision in the air. "I . . . saw her die. There's a narrow place in the ravine. She rode the mare at it one day. I don't know why—I don't think she'd ever tried to jump it before. She was my age. They hit the side, and you could see the mare scrabbling at the bank. And then . . . they just disappear." She shuddered, bent her head.

"Stop it!" He seized her by the arms, clutching her, wanting to hurt her, wanting to focus those strange, dreamy eyes, make her *see* him. "Ailene, do you know what he's *doing* to you?"

"I look like his daughter. He loved her. He loves me." Her back arched and her front hooves clattered on the flagstones as her distress translated itself into equine fear. "He built this house for me. He takes care of me."

"Loves you? He doesn't love you! He's punishing *her,*" Lonzo yelled the words because she didn't want to hear him. "He *crippled* you, do you hear?" His voice was cracking like it hadn't cracked since he was an adolescent, cracking and breaking. "If this Doyle person could do mermaids right, he could do you, too. He *wanted* it that way, your Uncle, he wanted your flaw, your failure. It's all around you—how flawed you are. How much he hates you. Don't you *see* it? *Listen* to me!"

She reared and flung him backward. For a heart-stopping instant, hooves pawed the air above Lonzo's head. How would her horse-muscles interpret grief and rage? His shoulderblades banged the wall and he flattened himself against it, half expecting to die. "Ailene?" he whispered. "Don't."

She dropped onto all fours again, made a sound in her chest that wasn't a sob, wasn't a groan, but twisted him inside. She was trembling, horse and woman, head bowed. "You're wrong," she whispered, face curtained by tangled hair. "He wouldn't do that."

"Will you come with me? Please?"

She was shaking her head, and there were no words to explain. He pulled his flute from the pack. The notes were dark, minor-key, layered with old hurt and loneliness. He edged them with love that could twist into hate, threaded it all with a tiny burnished gleam of hope. Of future. He put his soul into the music, poured it through the flute on that fragile stream of breath, of life. Finally, it ended. He tucked the flute back into his pack, wrung out and empty, because he had nothing left to say.

She lifted her head, looked down at him for one silent moment. "I'll

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walk with you to the mag-lev stop," she whispered. Her hooves thudded softly on the carpet. "I think . . . that's as far as I can go."

He followed her out onto the terrace, silent. The music was his voice and it hadn't touched her. He had no words to persuade her. Hurt welled up inside him, twisting like a knife in his guts. Was this what they paid for, the men and women who whispered *I love you* to him? For this pain?

"Come on." Ailene looked back over her shoulder, her eyes evading his. "Up this ramp. It comes out on top, and then it's just a short trot to the station."

Birds circled above his head, more sparrows. He flinched as one of them swooped down to perch on his arm. It clung to his sleeve with its tiny dark claws, staring at him from one mirror-bright eye. Lonzo stared back, frozen, seeing his reflection, tiny and perfect, in that glittering silver eye. And then it took off, fluttering back into the sky to join its mates.

"Ailene?" Cold was filling him up; like water pouring into him. "Ailene, he's watching everything!"

"So?" she whisked her tail, didn't slow.

I don't take betrayal well. . . . Renfrew's words fluttered around him like the mechanical sparrows. What had happened to the tall lover who had watched Angelina jump? Lonzo swallowed his fear and ran after her, his legs aching from the climb. The path curved past a huge freeform pool dug into the side of the hill, hanging gardens set among the cliffs, a tennis court. Who used these? Lonzo wondered. Anyone? Or were they simply here as further reminders that Ailene didn't belong in the human world? With one last burst of energy, Lonzo reached the top, stopped to pant.

Meadow up here. Greenhouses. Barn, and fenced horses. All black, Lonzo noticed. See *yourself,* Ailene, don't forget what you really are. His stomach knotted with hatred for Renfrew. Gardens and an orchard. More houses—small cottages—but these were square and usual. For servants, he thought, looking around. The people who had been so conspicuously absent from the house. They were still absent. The sunny meadow was as empty as a stage before the play begins. Nobody worked in the garden or the orchard. What play was scheduled here? A tragedy, Lonzo thought, full of dread. As if he had cued them, a dog barked nearby. Another. Big, deep-throated bays of rage.

Ailene spun, pale and frightened, her skittering hooves throwing clods of earth. "They're attack trained! When they're loose at night, you can't go outside." She whirled away from him, haunches bunching with her terror.

"Wait!" Lonzo cried, afraid that her horse-reflexes would carry her away in a wild bolt. "Ailene, wait for me!"

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She grabbed for his hand, clutched it while her body trembled and danced—and got control, slowly, with an effort. "Okay," she gasped, and they ran together across the meadow.

Her gait limped, ugly in this place, Lonzo realized, because he was seeing it with Uncle's eyes. The way *she* saw it. Dog-voices bayed again—ahead of them now, cutting them off. Ailene half-reared, her hand tearing free from his, and spun away from the sound. He shouted her name, but she gave no sign that she'd heard.

They were being herded toward the stream. Sparrows fluttered above their heads, circling and dipping, chirping in shrill mocking voices. Renfrew had been herding them all along. It struck Lonzo with sudden clarity, brought him to a stumbling halt. Maybe from the moment she had watched him in the forest. Maybe it wasn't just in death that his daughter had betrayed him. Maybe she hadn't betrayed him in death at all. "Ailene," Lonzo yelled. "Stop!"

She heard him, struggling with the reflexes that wanted to carry her headlong into flight, finally halted. In front of them, the ground dropped suddenly away into a narrow little gorge. White water tumbled over stones at the bottom, and the sides were steep. Rocky.

You could think of jumping a horse across the gap—if you were desperate.

It wasn't a deep chasm—thirty or forty feet, he guessed. Deep enough, if you fell the whole way down onto rock and shallow water. More than deep enough if you fell with six hundred kilos of horse on top of you. This was the place. "Not this way." He grabbed her hand and they ran back the way they'd come.

Ailene gave a soft cry, yanked her hand from his as she half-reared. Three dogs rose out of the tall grass to block their path, black as Ailene's flanks, bigger than any dog Lonzo had ever seen. They carried their heads low, red tongues lolling over white teeth, yellow eyes intent. Renfrew walked up behind them, circled by darting sparrows.

"Stand," he said. As one the three dogs froze, eyes fixed on their prey.

"Uncle." Ailene's voice was so faint Lonzo could barely hear it.

"It's dinner time." He walked toward them, leaving the dogs behind him. "Lonzo can find his own way to the station. Come back and have dinner with me."

He'd never reach the mag-lev. Lonzo read the verdict in Renfrew's smooth face, and his muscles tensed all at once.

"I told him I'd walk there with him." Ailene stopped trembling. "To make sure he didn't get lost." She lifted her head, her voice strengthening. "I'll come back."

"Will you?" His face was as still and cold as polished marble. "It will be dark."

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"How can you even ask?" But her eyes evaded his. "And where would I go?"

"I love you." He spread his hands, palms up. One of the sparrows fluttered down to land on the grass at Ailene's feet. "I'm asking you to come home with me." His voice was soft, and his eyes never left her face. "You're the only thing that matters to me. And you love me. You *know* that you love me. Send Lonzo to the station by himself. He doesn't need you."

Ailene flinched.

These words had such an *old* feel. "You said this to Angelina, didn't you?" Lonzo pushed forward. "What was his name? Angelina's lover? Did you kill him?"

"Be quiet." Renfrew didn't look at him, but the dogs bared their teeth.

"I was *made* to love you." Ailene fixed her eyes on the sparrow at her feet. "Did I ever have a choice?"

"None of us really has a choice in this life. Tell me you don't love me, Ailene." Renfrew's voice was soft as velvet. "You can't do it, can you? Because you do love me. You can't leave me. Where would you go? What would you do?"

"You made her into a monster." Lonzo's voice carried like a shout. "Patrick Doyle didn't steal that DNA, did he? You *asked* him to create Ailene. To suffer for *her.*"

"Shut up!" Renfrew took a step forward, and the dogs snarled. "This is your fault." Renfrew turned his stare on Ailene. "Do you know what he is, your pretty friend?"

"He's a whore." She looked Renfrew in the face. "He told me, Uncle."

"Whore?" Renfrew spat. "He's not even that. I recognize the prototype. He was created to process a person's biochemistry, then sweat the pheromones to match it. He's a sex toy, Ailene, that's all he is. Ask him to show you his ID code. It's tattooed on his body somewhere. He's a *thing.* Not even a human being!"

Not human. Dizzy, Lonzo shook his head. *Let's go see the doctor,* the woman in white always said. Mother, he cried soundlessly, but the word echoed in a vast emptiness. Maybe the doctor wasn't because *she* was sick. Maybe the doctor had . . . made him. *I love you, we love you,* a thousand voices whispered in his head.

"Not a human being, Uncle?" Ailene's voice was cold and clear as a tolling bell. "You mean he's like *me?*" She lifted her head, mane and hair blowing back in the evening breeze. "I'm not human either, or did you forget? Did you hate her for dying, or did you hate her for loving someone *else?* Let me tell you what I dream some nights. I dream I'm *her.* I dream that the dogs are chasing me, and I ride my mare at the ravine to get away. From you, *Father.*"

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"No!" He flinched, face averted. Behind him, the dogs inched forward. "It didn't happen that way!" he said hoarsely. "She was always trying dangerous jumps, pulling crazy stunts like that. Showing off for *him*. It was an accident, *his* fault, and . . . it tore me apart. Because I loved her so much."

Tortured eyes above that smile. Eyes full of love and hate. Lonzo shivered, because he had never seen such dissonance on a human face. He stepped in front of Ailene, a bare meter separating him from Renfrew. "You take her humanity away from her every day in this place. You make her a freak, make sure she knows it. Why?" He met Renfrew's pale eyes. "What happens if you let her be a woman?" he asked softly. "Why was your daughter running from you?"

Renfrew's face went white. With an inarticulate cry, he shoved his hand into his pocket, the dogs snarling and whining behind him. Lonzo caught the glint of light on a gun barrel. For him, or for her? Renfrew had given them the script, but they had lost it, and now, anything could happen.

Why did you try to die? she had asked him, not *Why did you try to kill yourself.* He had waited for the lightning and the lightning had disdained him.

He was through waiting. Lonzo flung himself forward, reaching for the gun, hands clamping around the lumpy unfamiliar shape, cringing with the expectation of sound, pain. Their fingers twined like lovers, his and Renfrew's, and the gun didn't go off. Chest to chest, they panted in each other's face. Renfrew was stronger, bent Lonzo's wrist slowly back, back, until he gasped with the pain. In a few seconds, bones would snap, and he would let go.

He had been close to Renfrew on their stroll to his terrace, close enough to smell him, to *taste* him when he breathed. Lonzo felt his skin flushing, felt sweat prickle his skin. And Renfrew reacted, fingers relaxing just a hair, hesitating for just an instant.

Lonzo wrenched the gun away, pointed it.

A hammerblow slammed his hand aside, and the gun spat, bounced on the grass. Lonzo spun sideways, knocked flat by the force of the blow, caught a glimpse of Ailene rearing over him, hoofs striking down again. He cringed, but they missed him, came down on the gun, smashing it, pounding it into the turf. Then she whirled, her shoulder slamming into Renfrew, knocking him sprawling. Almost in the same motion, she bent and grabbed Lonzo's wrist, yanked him to his feet. "Get on," she yelled, her body shuddering with the need to run.

The dogs howled and leaped forward, foam flying from their jaws.

He scrabbled a leg across her back, almost lost his seat as she whirled. Warm ribs arched beneath his thighs, slick-haired and slippery. He

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clutched her waist, thrown forward against her back as she lashed out with both heels. A dog yelped. Another buried its teeth in her flank and she screamed, almost unseating him again as she leaped forward.

Bright blood streaked her coat, impossibly red. The dogs were on their heels, and there was no place to go but the ravine, a dozen meters ahead. Even now, Renfrew was herding them, Lonzo thought bitterly. He had given his daughter a second chance, and she had repeated her choice.

"Hang on!" Ailene yelled, and her voice was raw with fear.

It was all he could do to stay on her back, blinded by her whipping mane, clutching her torso as she thundered forward. She had died here once. Maybe memory really did get passed on in the DNA, maybe she *remembered.* Falling. Dying. He felt her gather herself, horse and woman, too late to be scared because in a second she would leap. And they would land, or they would fall.

"I love you," he yelled as she hurled herself into the air. The words split him open like the lightning hadn't done. Because they were *truth,* and they had never been true before. He felt her body stretch desperately for that far wall, stretched with her, reaching for safety.

The shock of her landing nearly tossed him off. Arms around her waist, half-off and staring at the ground, he felt her waver, hind legs scrabbling for purchase as rocks and dirt tumbled into the void. She grunted, a deep animal sound of desperation. And then a foot caught, levered them upward in a wild heave that flung Lonzo back onto her equine shoulders.

They'd made it.

She paused for one instant on that brink, looking back over her shoulder, her face full of terrible grief. And then she broke into a rocking canter that carried them into the trees beyond the stream. The dogs' hysterical baying faded as she wove through the forest, ducking branches, never once looking over her shoulder at him.

She didn't stop until she'd broken through the wall of young trees, out onto the mag-lev right-of-way. After the tree-shadows, the sun nearly blinded him. She stood still, ribs heaving, horse and human. His knees buckled as he slid from her back and he sat down hard, butt in the dirt. He still had his pack slung over his shoulder. Miracle. He fumbled in it, took out the flute. It was undamaged, gleaming in its velvet wrapping. His hand hurt where her hoof had grazed it, and it was bleeding. He pulled the gloves on anyway, and began to play.

The tremble in his fingers came through, making the music tentative and uncertain at first. He played sunlight, leaf-shadow, graced with the counterpoint of dark blowing hair and the rhythm of a syncopated walk, blew loneliness and the ability to give but not receive. He twined light and dark together, played a melody of the human soul—love, hate, and need—carried on the living breath of the flute.

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He played love.

His breath was no longer just a stream on which to sail the notes. It came from a place deeper than his lungs, flowed like blood through the flute, blossomed in the music like a living heartbeat. There was no hole. No absence.

After awhile he stopped playing. He didn't end the music. He simply stopped playing, laid the flute down on his knees and bent over it, dizzy and exhausted. The sun had set, he noticed vaguely. Soft twilight turned Ailene's coat to polished onyx. She knelt slowly, awkwardly, so that she was on his level. Took his bruised hand in hers. "You're crying," she said.

"So are you." He touched her face. "What he said about me. . . ."

"It doesn't matter."

"Yes, it does." He rewrapped the flute, stowed it in his pack. It was there—the ID—tattooed in tiny green letters and numbers up high on his inner thigh, where only a lover would see it. He had always wondered why it was there. Maybe the woman in white was a technician with the compassion to love a creation. "What does it mean to be human?" he asked softly.

"You need a bandage for your hand." She stroked the darkening flesh gently. "I don't even know what it means to be *me.*"

"You can find out now."

"He's right. I can't leave. What would I do?" She looked down at her equine chest, touched the shiny black hair, the big-boned legs folded beneath her. "Where would I *go?*"

"Anywhere we want." Lonzo closed his bruised hand around hers, wouldn't let go. "We can get you a flute, play the shacktowns. People are going to love me whether I want them to or not. They'll take care of us because of that. They're going to pay money to look at you, want to put kids on you for a ride."

"That sounds like whoring." She drew back a little.

"Your . . . Renfrew said I wasn't even that." He wouldn't let her look away. "We are what we are. We can't change that. But we can go find out what it means—to be us."

"Us." Her fingers twitched in his. "I couldn't let you kill him," she said softly. "He created me to love him and . . . I do." Sadness filled her eyes like early nightfall. "Even now. I can't help it." She lurched to her feet, ungainly and equine.

"You're hurt." He touched the torn skin, the crusted blood. "We need to wash it. In the stream maybe." He got to his feet, leaned against her shoulder, hard muscle beneath his shoulder, warmth and slick hair, and the pungent smell of her sweat. "We can't keep from doing what we were created to do," he said softly.

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"He won't bother us." She looked away, sighed. "I found some . . . transactions that he would not like people to know about. I hid them in the Net. I'll e-mail and tell him that I have them. That I won't use them if he leaves us alone."

"You've thought about leaving him before."

"I did. I couldn't do it." She looked away.

Lonzo shouldered his pack. "Want to walk for awhile after we take care of your leg?" He nodded at the waxing moon rising over the eastern horizon. "There'll be enough light if we stick to the mag-lev track."

"You can ride." She sounded shy. "You aren't very heavy, and my leg's fine." She looked away. "A part of me wants to stay with Uncle. It would be safer."

I love you, the voices whispered from his pack. They would always be as close as weakness. "Safer, yeah." He sighed. Then he put an arm around her waist, scrambled awkwardly onto her back. The warm arch of ribs between his legs brought back his dream, but the warmth inside him didn't have much to do with lust. Besides, the architecture was wrong for an erection. He laughed.

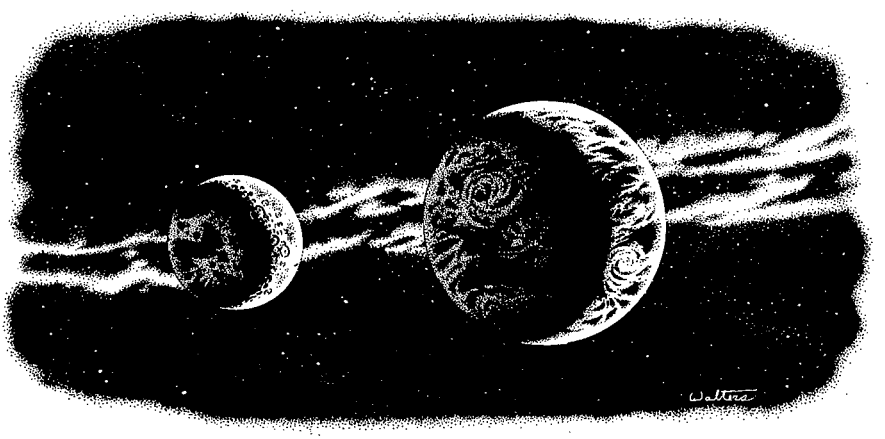
"What's so funny?"

"I have fallen in love with a mare," he said. "This is not normal."

What divides human from not-human? Who gets to fence that perimeter? It occurred to Lonzo that she didn't react to him like most people did. Maybe his biochemistry couldn't handle her pheromones. So if she loved him—*if* it happened—it would be *real.*

Her sigh pushed against his knees. "You know, I guess we're both monsters—if we *let* ourselves be."

Perhaps they could be *human,* instead. ●



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METAPHYSICS AT THE PLANETARIUM

Susan has mastered her tiny universe,
twisting knobs and toggling switches
to send the heavens spinning round
from polar view to polar view,
from epoch to epoch, moons rising
and falling, suns in declination,
Orion hunting across this dome where
dippers pour away from the north
before southern crosses rise to view.

Ah, but that the world could be this way,
that we each could control our cosmos,
dial an orderly future, rebuild a shattered past
with a slide show, some lasers and smoke,
and the best in German ingenuity to dot our
dark night skies with bright specks of light
complete with helpful guidelines.

We all need a Susan, one who knows
all there is to know in her own universe,
can connect it all up for us, make it clear
through the confusion of our shadowed skies
where too many stars shine, or maybe not enough
of them, or maybe our sky is overcast
and we have no dials to clear it.

—Rick Wilber

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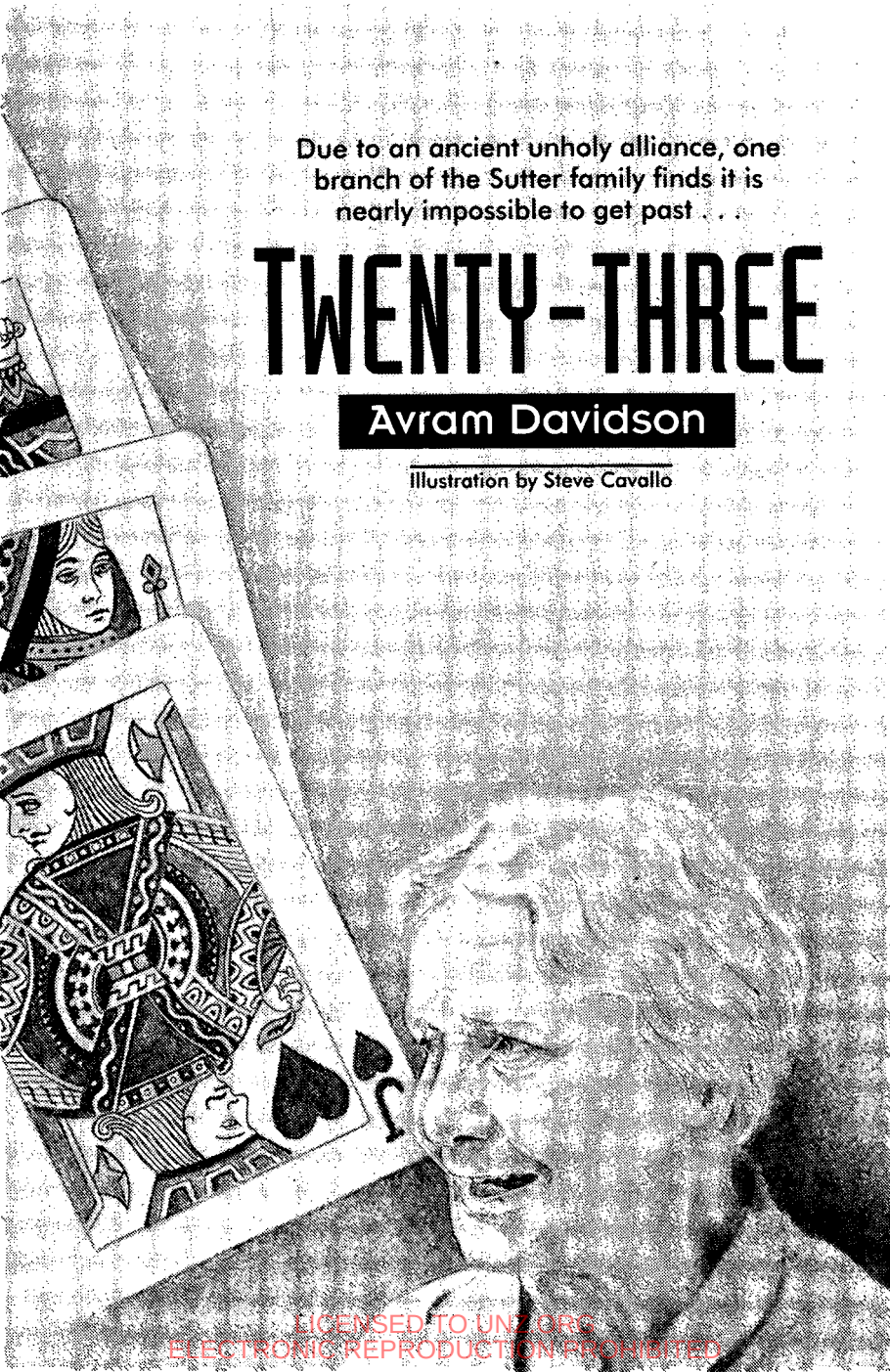
Due to an ancient unholy alliance, one branch of the Sutter family finds it is nearly impossible to get past . . .

TWENTY-THREE

Avram Davidson

Illustration by Steve Cavallo



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Breakfast one day at the Sutters. Ellis looked up. "Say, do we have an Uncle Zachary?" he asked. Sound dies away, save for Samuel at an egg in its shell and Lewis clattering a coffee-spoon. Louise Sutter, their mother, slightly clears her throat. "Uncle Zachary had a weakness of the chest and his doctors thought he should go and live in the West where the air is dry. Samuel, don't fiddle. Lewis." If Ellis observes the difference between *Uncle Zachary has* and *Uncle Zachary had,* Ellis does not say so.

"Sidney Coolidge claims," is what Ellis next says.

"Sidney *Cool*idge!" —his sister Lucinda— "dirty-mouthed boy. Dirty-faced, too," she says.

Ellis emphatically agrees. "Dirty in lots of other places, too, say, you wouldn't believe—" His brother Lewis advises him to finish his fish-cake. His brother Samuel wants to know why they don't more often have bacon for breakfast, and Uncle Abel Sawyer, as though he had been waiting for the chance, says that bacon is *fourteen cents a pound!* Farmers never had it so good. Uncle Sawyer says. Aunt Effie (Sutter) Sawyer, pouring skim milk over something arid called Breakfast Food, declares, "The less pig, the more pie." Aunt Harriet Sutter looks at her nephews with perhaps something like foreboding. Perhaps not. What she says is not overheard. Aunt Sarah Sutter is looking at her plate. And the discussion as to what Aunt Effie Sawyer's saying means causes Uncle Zachary and Sidney Coolidge to be forgotten.

Agnes brings in the pie. The real and not the proverbial one. There is always pie. And always Agnes. Not always the same ones, of course.

Aunt Sarah eats well enough. And, as usual, she is silent.

Aunt Sarah is usually in the same chair in the library and doesn't talk much, but saying this is not to describe a woman in rusty black with massive hands on ivory-headed walking-stick: no. Sarah is really quite slender, has been becomingly grey-haired since memory runs, wears something quite too chic to be called a pants-suit: and besides, pants-suits are yet to be invented. It is called *Aunt Sarah's house-costume* and she does not wear it out of doors. Usually the costume is grey, sometimes it has a small black checked pattern. Sarah reads a lot. There is no television in the world, the radio yet has ear-phones, and would it still had. If one asks, and few do, "What are you reading, Sarah?" one is quietly and quickly told the name of the author. Never the title. Once in a long while someone ventures to ask, "What's it about?" Really, what is Emerson, for example, *about?* A brief and level stare, and her eyes return to her book. Sarah does not suffer fools gladly.

Once, at least, Aunt Sarah tries to revive the pleasant old-fashioned

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custom of reading aloud to the family circle. Her choice is Longfellow's lovely poem *The Aftermath*.

When the summer fields are mown,
When the birds are fledged and flown,
And the dry leaves strew the path,

With the falling of the snow,
With the cawing of the crow,
Once again the fields we mow
And gather in the aftermath.

Not the sweet new grass with flowers
Is this harvesting of ours;
Not the upland clover bloom;

But the rowan mixed with weeds,
Tangled tufts from marsh and meads,
Where the poppy drops its seeds,
In the silence and the gloom.

The very brief silence at the poem's end is not broken by a murmur of pleasure; but by an alto, a tenor, and a baritone, guffaw. A voice says, "How well he knows—!" Says? Sneers?

Directly after this short poem comes by far a longer, beginning, *Should you ask me, whence these stories?* Nobody asks her, nobody at all. Aunt Sarah quietly closes the book. And—publically, at least—never opens it again. The custom is not revived.

She reads, too, things unpublished. Family histories, letters, journals, diaries: these things she reads downstairs in the library.

Aunt Sarah knows all about, for instance, the question of the twenty-two and a half acres of good meadow-land on which the good fortunes of the Sutter family (*of the County of Berne in the Switzers Land*) are founded. Well, the good fortunes of one part of the Sutter family. Some say that land is rightfully the property of another part of that family. It is more than twenty-two and a half acres, some say. A bit more, some say, a good bit more. Ill feelings are often caused in families by the division of property. Or by its non-division.

Upstairs or down Aunt Sarah plays solitaire, or sets out what is understood to be the Tarot.

Mostly she is silent. One tends to leave her alone.

Sutter sisters and daughters are quiet and almost plain: very well, then: *plain*. Sutter brothers and sons are something else, and although

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there are older Sutter women at home, there are no older Sutter men. Wars consume them, they go to far-off places and do not return and neither do they write. There are in these days only three young Sutter brothers at home, and then there are none. Of the older set, Gerald is generally understood to be somewhere very far off where he wears a burnoose or a turban and perhaps it is not true that a foreign ruler places a price upon his head. Kingston's name is on a cross in France in a place of many crosses row on row. Woodruff's name is not, although he, too, goes to France and never returns. Unless his mother's belief, seldom expressed aloud, is true. And that it *is* Woodruff Sutter who is buried in the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

And if the older brothers do leave some memories of unfortunate *incidents* at home, surely their heroic deeds abroad, one year apart, redeem them. And more. And more. *Valiant and courageous* (official). *Reckless and suicidal in bravery* (unofficial). *Come on, you sons of bitches, do you want to live forever?* . . . echoes . . . echoes . . . dying, dying, dying. . . .

The younger set of this generation of young men Sutters at home consists of Lewis, Ellis, and Samuel, boys of great charm and rascal beauty and of, one hears, increasingly devilish behavior. So the Headmaster of Afton says (this last phrase). For a while they are away at school or college; one by one (again and again) are expelled . . . run off . . . invited not to return from vacation . . . suspended . . . dismissed . . . . Uncle Sawyer, the non-Sutter who actually runs the business, thinks it is time they settle down and learn something about running it themselves. So one hears. Uncle Sawyer is perhaps an optimist.

They all live together in a large, an immense, wooden house overlooking a river with an American Indian name, the river which (with all its rights) is sometimes described as "a wholly-owned subsidiary of the Sutter family." Its waters are imponded by a series of dams and by each dam is a dirty brick building wherein wool from far and wide is washed . . . spun . . . woven . . . made into rugs and blankets said to wear like iron: these both perhaps more sought after formerly than presently.

The water, thus collected, washes and scours the wool and carries away the effluents of everything from sheep-dung to caustic soda and solute suint or wool-sweat and overwashes of stinking dyestuffs: it is long since the alewife or the shad are found in these streams. The Sutter Corporation collects the waters in its pens and ponds, releases them at times and between times to turn its wheels and fill its vats and, of later days, kindle its electricity. And if the river, restive, overflows its pent-up backwaters, converting tillable fields or sites for houses into sog and bog, nourishing on others' lands instead of hay or potatoes the coarse and uncommercial cat-tail, the rank and profitless goldenrod and purple milkweed, and the frail, pale wild white rose which cannot be cut and

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sold: why, what is this to the Corporation? nothing and less than nothing; let the former freeholders, if they will, take the Pauper's Oath and receive fifty cents a day viaticum and forfeit their suffrage: *root, hog, or die* is a saying worthy of the saints, and *pecunia non olet,* of the sages.

Cousin Chester Boswell lives in a small house the other side of the Village green. This, and shares in the Sutter Corporation, constitute the larger part of his patrimony. Well . . . anyway, a *large* part. And a large part consists of an intense interest in local and familial history, and he shares this with Aunt Sarah. They also share a cousin Waldo Sutter who lives in an even smaller house by a smaller river which has yet to know its place, unlike Waldo Sutter, who does not choose to get around much. Very rarely does Someone ask, "What does Waldo Sutter do?" and the answer is that *He* minds his own business. A . . . well . . . not exactly a message and not exactly a present but Something of Interest has come from him. As it has about once a year. Bridey has come in bearing a large brown paper bag, made in the days before paper bags were made by machinery. It is thick and heavy. And it is old. She says, "Waldo Sutter sends John Kelly with this to drop off if he's coming this way." And adds, "Waldo wants the bag back. And could you let him have a little kerosene in a bottle." The words and deeds are invariable. So is Aunt Sarah's nod as she empties the contents into a shallow wicker basket and hands over the bag. Bridey takes it and goes out.

Invariably, too, the bag (and now the basket) contains some old papers and an old book, which they all know the cousin (not a first cousin and not even a second) has had delivered at the back door. There is no other reason in the world why he would have been coming "this way," but John Kelly is Waldo Sutter's (only) tenant and no longer employable at the mill. Not for money or any other consideration would their conjoint cousin dispose of any books or papers to a historical society or a college library, a dealer, or collector; but month by month as they work their way out of the disintegrating boxes in his closely packed little house (it smells strongly of many things and the rare callers are perhaps grateful for the kerosene) he drops them in the old brown paper bag, its smell now too faint than to more than guess if it had once contained say fresh whole nutmegs or macouboy snuff or pigtail twist chewing tobacco. Candied ginger. Something for old man Waldo Sutter to smell now and then besides his rancid socks. And once a year he sends these fragments to the large house which he himself never enters by the back door *or* the front.

Bridey or Agnes or Katie is even now handing over the kerosene in a gallon-jug as per instructions . . . a *full* gallon jug. And giving Old Man Kelly a doughnut. Or a piece of johnnycake.

"Well, what have we here?" asks Chester Boswell. Lame, pensioned.

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Part of the patrimony. A patriot, Chester, even if *he* is not left for dead two days at Chickamauga; but merely breaks his leg in camp at Tampa before he can get to Cuba; Chester Boswell never hears the bugle-call at Kettle Hill, the bone has not healed well and there is always talk that it will have to be re-broken and re-set. When Chester Boswell comes to visit the large house—which is fairly often—he stays put for the whole day. "What have we *here?*" He adds, "This time."

Here, and Chester handles it ver-ry carefully, is a sadly broken old book, pages worn and foxed and stained with candle-grease (to Old Sutter, kerosene is a modern invention). He points the title out to his cousin Sarah. *Wonders of the Invisible World / by the Rev*^{d} M^{r} Cotton Mather, they exchange glances, she turns some soiled leaves, indicates with a finger the marginal notations; they nod. Out of the book slips a piece of flowered wallpaper, evidently trimmed with a knife. "Waste not, want not," Chester Boswell says. "Use it up. Wear it out. Make it do. Or do without." Part of the wisdom of their fathers. On the back of the wallpaper something is written with a lead-pencil made in the days when lead-pencils had lead in them and not graphite. He and she bend their heads to read. *Kin deamons marry?* "That's Crossley's writing. —Crossley's kind of question, too." The next question leaps across a vast sea of supposition. *Is the divorc leagle?* Crossley's spelling is not meticulous. But it is clear. *How are thes leagel and ill liegal children told apart?* How indeed; like someone better-known, Crossley Sutter does not stop for an answer: in smaller letters writes *prepar y*^{e} The feast. Beneath that begins a list

frsh Porke
Samp

"When is the last time *I* ate samp?" asks Chester Boswell. "Boy," he answers. "Makes a rougher mush than regular hominy grits. *Well.* Taste and scent? No argument. Eh? Sal?" Aunt Sarah's part of the conversation is made chiefly by little motions of her mouth and brows. Though now and then she gestures. Slightly. *Feast?* Slattern hog and half-cracked corn? Crossley Sutter, their great-grandfather's half-brother, has not been known as a delicate eater. Has not been *del*icate. Lines from his will are long repeated by generations of children when adults are not present. *To my Bastard son Nathaneal five pounds. To my basterd Son Slatheal Five pounds. To my imprudent dauhgther Prudence born in christain wedlock but most UnGreatful slutt Three cents and a buckit of ashes.*

Still . . .

And what have they *here?* Prudence's long-missing will they have *here* and she has made many dispositions and someone's heavy hand has printed DIED INTESTATE, for her Will is not signed, impetuous death

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does not wait for that. Prudence is Waldo Sutter's grandmother. She has never married. Its presence here signifies that he has at last given up all hope of getting any of those bolts of cloth, that cherrywood furniture (is it anything like this cherrywood furniture), those cases of pewter plates, sets of best blue chinaware. *A little kerosene in a bottle.* Last time he sends sixteen Old Farmers Almanacs, 1810-1826, and a straight razor in a flaking case; the boys, amused, use it in turn.

Old John Kelly is his only tenant, a gallon of lamp oil will last Waldo a long while, and the jugs are worth a penny apiece in trade. Pork. Samp. Chickamauga does not kill Waldo Sutter. Neither do the floods drown him. Certainly not the Spring freshets. Even if the Sutter company will not adjust its river-level to his comfort.

What else is *here?* An old pamphlet on growing pot-herbs, an old booklet on raising silkworms (the smell is soon got used to), and exactly twenty small empty envelopes from a Department of Agriculture once generous with new types of seeds. All very old. But no doubt useful. And here is a note in age-browned ink on a part of a page torn from, it might be, one of those small bound "pocket-books" in which thrifty goodwives record sales of Best Brown Eggs in terms of shillings, for complete changeover to dollars and cents has to await the later 1850s; on it a short note:

Salatheal Sutter
old and mauger
torn a part by wolves

And a note upon the note, in somewhat darker ink, the iron nib biting deep into the page NOT WOLVES

No more.

And also just such a tiny volume and Aunt Sarah at once finds the half-torn page to match the torn-out note; in a tiny hand is neatly written, *John Q. Adams dead today.*

No more.

But enough of ancient history. Lewis, Ellis, and Samuel Sutter. "Charm and rascal beauty"? Yes. Increasingly "devilish behavior"? Yes. As children they are as sprightly and nimble as goat-kids. There is, later, something fawn-like (faun-like?) about the young Sutter boys, indeed devilishly bad as their behavior is sometimes said to be, eh? *their childish presences disarm,* eh? At twenty a growing heaviness becomes apparent, not fat, nothing like that, something immensely strong seems coming; the early wildness is replaced by a more deliberate quality, quite beyond description. And now they get into fights, fights—reports go about of a brutality which is not to be explained—though sometimes it has to be explained away.

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Does Helen Sutter have a palsy? Dr. Brainert says no. Then what is the reason for the frequent trembling? Dr. Brainert prescribes this and suggests that. But Helen Sutter Woodruff Sutter continues so often to tremble. Aunt Harriet proposes a trip south. South Carolina. Northern Florida. "I will go with you," Aunt Harriet offers. "And Effie."

"There isn't enough money," Aunt Sawyer (Effie) says at once.

"There is enough money for that," her niece Lucinda insists. Cinda's sister Amy has married, and moved away to Portland, Oregon, which is about as far as she can move away and still keep her feet dry.

"Since Abel died," says her aunt, she means Uncle Sawyer, "there hasn't been enough money for anything." And, it is true that things seem shabbier in the very big house. Katie has died, and Mary, grown old, is retired. Neither has been replaced. Often there is talk of "having the carpenters in," but so far they are not being had. "I *wish* that the boys would set aside the nonsense. I *wish* that the boys would *take hold*."

Aunt Harriet leaves for a moment the subject of Aiken or Vero Beach. "It is The Prohibition," she says. "The Volstead Act. It doesn't prevent. It *encourages*."

Helen says that she hoped It would skip another generation. "I know that people blame Henry and me for marrying although we are cousins. But it had skipped two generations. And I had hoped It would skip this one, too." Tremble. Tremble. "If Kingston or Woodruff had lived. If Gerald . . ." Aunt Sarah's mouth moves. But she remains silent.

"Does no one hear from Gerald?" asks Chester Boswell.

A universal silence. *No* one hears from Gerald.

Aunt Harriet looks all around. Almost furtively. As though she knows she should not ask, she asks. "How much money was settled on the De Sousa family?"

Aunt Effie Sawyer is a lady, and ladies do not glare. Almost, though, she glares. "You know very well how much. One. Hundred. Thousand. *Dollars*. Taken out of capital." She does gasp, however, and she rolls up her eyes: tightens, but does not clench, her fists. "Out of *cap*ital."

Lucinda reminds them (yet again) of the condition of Harry De Sousa's body. Witnesses report how the red touring-car (is there another custom-painted red touring-car in all the world?) backs up and runs over Harry De Sousa again and again. "There are five small children," Lucinda says. "If there is ever a prosecution . . ." Her mother trembles, trembles. Perhaps she remembers other . . . *incidents* . . . . Before. *And* since.

And other settlements.

It is long since that a settlement can be made (thus leaving Zachary free to absouatulate for Teckshus. *Free? Zach*ary? *free?*) by giving someone a ninety-nine year lease on an ice-house for ninety-nine dollars a year. And, anyway, there is only one ice-house, for

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scarcely flows
the frozen Tanais
through a waste of snows

Talk, before that, of giving Waldo Sutter the lease? Talk.

Lucinda does not now remind them that she herself witnesses the near-death on North Main Street of the Universalist minister. She screams and screams, warnings to the Rev. Mr. Showalter, appeals to her brothers. Mr. Showalter, after stoically refusing to acknowledge danger in the red touring-car's furious approach, finally with a squeak of fear barely flings himself to safety; a contemporary—Dr. Nickolson the homeopath—extends shaking hands to hold the trembling cleric up; cries, "Don't tell *me* those boys don't have the witch-bump!" The Nickolsons have lived here almost as long as the Sutters: no love lost.

The red touring-car continues to tear along the street like a whirlwind, madcap yells, howls, and cries coming from the front seat: Lewis at the Wheel. Mr. Showalter has suffered such a shock that he must retire; will place charges: *duty!*—doesn't care about himself but cares about the public safety. Uncle Sawyer speaks soothingly and speaks and speaks and gives directions for a new roof to be put on the Meetinghouse. Mr. Showalter shakes his head. And on the Manse. Mr. Showalter slackens, but feels that someone must be taught a lesson. Uncle Sawyer mentions faith and hope. Uncle Sawyer settles a ten-year endowment on the Universalist pulpit's ever-faltering income. Mr. Showalter takes a vacation in the White Mountains, returns to preach with renewed vigor the doctrines of James Relly and Hosea Ballou (" *'No Hell! No Hell! No Hell! No Hell!' rings out the Universalist bell!*") —But even Uncle Sawyer cannot keep this up forever. And, it turns out, neither can Lewis.

If Aunt Harriet pretends to believe that her nephews' troubles stem from drink alone, *let* her. Does no one point out that Samuel, for example, does not drink. He is certainly never seen in any of the local saloons, but he is certainly talked about in them. "Sam Sutter? Know what they say about what his motto is? 'Women and children *first*,' that's what they say his motto is." People laugh at this. But their laughs are not nice ones.

Does Samuel suffer from amnesia? Sometimes people make references to the recent past, and his expression is a blank . . . that is if there can be a troubled blank. Can there be?

One afternoon in the early spring the ladies of the family are in the music room listening to the victrola. All, that is, save for Aunt Sarah, who is, as usual, in her place in the library wearing her neat housecostume; as usual, silent. Chester Boswell is, as usual, talking . . . perhaps in a lower tone of voice, even, than usual. "Gone upstairs to wash my hands," he says. "Samuel's door. Open." Everyone knows how such

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things are. One has *no* intention of *look*ing. At all. But there is a slight movement and it catches one's attention, Chester's head turns automatically. Samuel is sitting at his desk, holding his head in his hands, motionless save for a slight fidget of the fingers in the hair, slight but incessant. Aunt Sarah looks up and at her cousin Chester when he says this, and he imitates for her this slight (but steady) motion, somehow restless, somehow steady, of Samuel's fingers as he holds his head in his hands.

"I don't like to see this," Chester Boswell murmurs. "That's how it all started with Lew . . ." That's how it *start*ed with Lew? And how does it end with Lew? For it does end. At the age of only twenty-three, Lewis takes up a heavy old Colt Navy revolver, once the property of Selah Sutter, Waldo's elder brother, and shoots himself. Fatally.

No note. As Samuel murmurs to Ellis at the service, "Not even a forwarding address."

Mother Sutter (Helen) "takes it better than we would have thought." How, better? Does she not have practice? Never mind about Zachary, she is only a child when Zachary so hastily lights out for the Territories . . . and for oblivion. He is her uncle . . . *great*uncle. Hardly counts . . . Uncle Zachary . . . though he lives on in local memory, in the minds and mouths of Sidney Coolidge and the like. Is Sid's an august name in these days? in this place? Less. Llewellyn in Wales. Cohen in Tel Aviv. *But.*

Kingston, Woodruff, Gerald. She doesn't see Kingston and Woodruff dead? She doesn't know for sure that Gerald—? She knows for sure. In her mind she sees them each dead a hundred thousand times. Perhaps there is even some comfort about Lewis. At least she touches the coffin. At least she stands by the grave. *She tries to live a little while without him, likes it not, and dies.* Waldo Sutter, he whom Chickamauga cannot kill, he whom none of them have seen in *years,* puts on his old Union uniform and attends the funeral. Stands apart, speaks to no one, is covertly observed by those curious to see if they can observe traces of the alleged blood of the Narragansetts . . . or even of a darker and more vigorous tribe. He speaks to no one; on his way home, whom Chickamauga does not kill or the wolves tear apart, collapses by the side of the road. Old John Kelly, hopefully skulking (he who should have known better than hope) to see if Waldo perhaps goes to the postfuneral feast, returning with victuals in his pocket, finds him dead.

His will: *Them as gotten everthing else as ought to ben mine, let them git all I have to leave. . . .*

And, one year later, one year and some months, Samuel at twenty-three, after something not less horrible for being less describable, Samuel rushes, roaring, naked, through the woods and dives into the water and swims outward with powerful strokes until vanishing from sight. This

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is shortly after Chester Boswell sees Samuel in the room with his head in his hands, motionless save for that fidget of the fingers. The rains have been heavy, the river is high, surely Samuel *knows* this? Surely Samuel knows that he is swimming *toward* the dam? They find him dead at the foot of it, drowned, and with many bones broken.

Ellis's once-high spirits, slackened when Lewis dies, seem now suddenly and entirely checked. There are no more stories told about him. One sees him no more at meals even; Agnes brings him up a tray: reports that he sits with head in hands, fingers trembling. Chester Boswell, Cousin Chester? His bad leg? It *is* re-broken and it is re-set. A room on the first floor in the large house is cleared up for him: the office of *Henry,* lost and forgotten *Henry*, husband to Helen, father of Kingston, Woodruff, Gerald, Lucinda, Amy, Lewis, Samuel, Ellis. And there Chester sleeps—what formal sleep he gets—although he spends most of his time in the library with his leg in its cast up on an ottoman; Chester still suffers from the sinking of the *Maine,* on which he never sets eyes, sometimes murmuring to silent Aunt Sarah, sometimes dozing, to awaken abruptly with a little groan. There is perhaps a slightly warmer relation between Ellis and Chester than with the other boys, has he been more like an uncle than a cousin? Ellis never comes down to see him, sends him no general or especial messages. *His* door is open only to Agnes, and, twice a day, the tray.

Down below, they wait. And wait. As each day lengthens, so the tension. Yes, even so, a dreadful shock when, one morning, a great crash. And a quite frightful human sound, part scream, and—"What the devil—" cries Chester Boswell. And now another and rather lesser crash, and the scene is one as long prepared for some set piece, for a second all gape, then a wild rush up the stairs, somehow today the carpenters have been gotten in at last, large strong men—the thud of shoulders against a shuddering door. Voices cry out in horror, there are screams and shouts and—

Silent Aunt Sarah sits silently; unmoving, her neatly trousered legs in the grey with the small black check. Trembling Chester Boswell sits, too, a prisoner of his patriot leg in its heavy cast. Turmoil, terror, tragedy. Ellis has been shaving, pauses in mid-stroke and cries out and pushes over the heavy piece of cherrywood furniture with the mirror and the basin, slashes his throat. *Deeply*. Doctor Brainert is summoned, can do nothing.

Perhaps an hour or so later when there is something more like quiet once again, Chester Boswell, "*Why,*" he asks, in a trembling voice, "*Why* do all these devilish tragedies always seem to happen when they are twenty-three? Don't they always seem to happen when—"

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Aunt Sarah breaks her silence. Her long, long silence. "Of course," she says. "That is when the horns begin to grow."

She leans forward and she begins to talk. And talk.

The "new" family burying-grounds make up part of the original property of twenty-two and a half acres. Some say, it is a bit more than that. A good bit more than that, some say. ●

"MARJORIE! I'VE TOLD YOU BEFORE! DON'T FEED HIM TABLE SCRAPS!"

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SON, DEAD ON THE SOLSTICE

for Wade

I always hugged my son at our good-byes,
and our hellos, and tighter still
at odd times when the Shadow fell across
my much misgiving mind, but still
all premonition comes to naught,
prediction cannot still the stars,
whole universes turn
like mill wheels rolling wheat seeds flat;
for all I feared, from all I feared,
I could not hold him tight enough.

Some dark momentum I could not foresee
except as vague foreboding thirty years,
the creak of dark celestial gears,
some dread momentum coming on almost from
birth,
some heavy gravity from uncharted stars
that wheeled toward an intersection decades on
pressed us apart, however hard we clung;
from fate I feared, from forces Physics strict,
I could not hold him tight enough.

Invisible suns
beyond the solar system's rim,
all reaching apogee at once,
with black hole force
that even love cannot deny
tore him from arms that
could not hold him tight enough,
tore him from arms that, gone,
grasp for him still.

—William John Watkins

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FRAMES

Mario Milosevic

Mario Milosevic works in a small town library in Stevenson, Washington. He is a regular contributor to *Ruralite* magazine, the managing editor of *Daughters of Nyx: a magazine of Goddess stories, mythmaking, and fairy tales*, and a magazine reviewer for *Tangents II*. His fiction has appeared in *F&SF, Pulphouse*, and *Space and Time*. The following short, but remarkably powerful tale, is his first story for *Asimov's*.

#1

Janet found an unexposed roll of super 8 film in the box of odds and ends her father had sent to her with a note that read: Here is some stuff I don't need anymore. Maybe you can find a use for it. The film was still in its airtight yellow pouch. Janet pushed aside an old quilt her grandmother had made years ago and found the dusty old super 8 camera her father had used for mental Olympics competitions, piano recitals, birthday parties, and vacations. This was before camcorders and VCRs. Janet set up the camera on a tripod in the living room, training the lens on the maple tree in the front yard.

#2

The camera had a stop-motion button that exposed one frame at a time. Janet loaded the film, attached the remote release cable to the stop motion button, and clicked a picture of the tree. It was late afternoon. Sweet light, she remembered a photographer on a television talk show once called it. The sun low, the air clear, the light golden, almost solid. The leaves on the maple tree illuminated like actors on a stage. She nodded. Sweet light.

#3

Janet stirred vegetables around a wok and remembered being told when she was two years old that she was a genius, a prodigy. She was able to speak several languages by the time she was three, invented calculus by age four, and composed and performed symphonies at five. Her parents had high hopes for her, but she was more interested in her friends.

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#4

She created her friends the day after her third birthday party, when her father had told her she needed to stop having fun and spend more time with her math books. She thought and thought and thought about what kind of friends she wanted to have. She wanted them to like her. She wanted them to be smaller than her. She wanted them to pay attention to her. There were about a dozen of them, and they did all those things. After that, Janet's friends would come around occasionally and take her away from her genius activities. Her father fretted whenever she spent this time with her friends. Janet, he said, you need to keep up with your studies. You could be the greatest mind the world has ever seen.

#5

Janet turned off the stove and went to the camera and snapped another frame. Then she went back to the kitchen and poured the vegetables over a plate of rice. She ate slowly, in dim light, glancing up at the wall clock every few minutes. By the time she finished her meal, she was in complete darkness. The moon cleared the horizon a few minutes later. Its silvery light seemed cold, but interesting. She rose and snapped off two more frames.

#6

At the supermarket where she worked the midnight to seven A.M. shift, Janet smiled at the customers and pulled their groceries over the laser scanner. Someone looked at her with that glint of recognition she had grown to hate. Say, he said, aren't you that girl, that genius? Janet felt her face turn red, and silently cursed the local reporter who had unearthed her story and published a recent snapshot along with pictures of her at the mental Olympics television show from thirty years ago. Everyone tells me that, said Janet, but would a genius be working at a Safeway? I mean, really! The man laughed and picked up his change and groceries. I guess you're right, he said, but you sure do look like her. Janet remembered the super 8 camera on the tripod at home.

#7

Janet bought a pint of ice cream and a spiral bound notebook after she punched out. She got home as the sun was rising. She sat on the couch in her living room and studied the maple tree as she ate the ice cream. The tree looked as cold as her hands felt holding the carton. She stood and walked to the camera and held the remote cable in her hand. She exposed five frames, spaced a minute apart, then recorded the date and time of each exposure in her notebook. Later, she brought the notebook up to date by recording the dates and times of the first three exposures.

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#8

Janet's father phoned her and asked if she'd found any use for the box of odds and ends. I don't know, Dad, she said, I used the movie camera. Do you think that was a good idea? Her father hesitated, then said, Sure Janet, sure. You're really going to be something. Do you know that? You're going to be someone great, someone people will talk about for a long long time. Janet's friends came into the living room then. She dropped the phone and told them all about the movie she was making. It's going to take me a whole year! she said. They nodded and clapped their little hands and she hugged them tight.

#9

Janet played with her friends for the rest of the morning. She felt flush with joy as they each pressed the button on the camera several times, and she carefully recorded each frame in her notebook. The tree will change over time, she said. The leaves will turn color and fall off, the branches will get snow on them, the buds will come back after winter and then the leaves will grow again. It'll be a cycle. Then we can play the movie and watch the tree change over time. Won't that be fun? Her friends nodded.

#10

Janet's friends left soon after noon. Janet was too tired to try to talk them into staying. Come back, she said. We will, said her friends. As long as you remember us.

#11

Janet's boss said she was doing an excellent job. You're so good, Janet, he said. I'll never understand for the life of me why you, a genius, wants to work here, but I'm glad you do. You're so good. Janet nodded and tried to smile, but it was not the same as smiling at the customers. She wanted this job too much, she had to be too nice. It wasn't fair that people thought she was so smart. It wasn't fair. It was like they wanted her to think she was a failure. She thought about her notebook. It was almost all she thought about as she spent her nights scanning people's groceries. She had begun to embellish her notebook with comments about her feelings and her state of mind at the moment each frame was snapped.

#12

A year after she started, the movie was finished. According to Janet's notebook, the film was exactly one thousand, six hundred, and forty five frames long. Less than two minutes. She got the film developed, then set up the projector so that the movie would show on her living room wall.

#13

Janet made popcorn dripping with butter, sprinkled with salt. She waited for her friends to come. When they arrived, they snuggled around

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her like kittens. They were soft and warm and cuddly. Janet thought of all the people over the years who said she was a genius. She wasn't. She just knew how to make friends. She reached over and snapped on the projector. The wall counted down numbers: five four three two. Then a beep and a crackle.

#14

The maple tree was like a sculpture on the wall, jerkily growing from a lushly green thicket of leaves to a smear of orange, yellow, red, then a frosty white, a stark crooked outline against the sky, and finally a fresh green thicket again. Then the wall became bright white and the film spooled through the projector to the end. Janet did not snap off the projector. She felt tears well up in her eyes. She wanted to tell her friends that *that* was the genius. The *tree* was genius. She wasn't. She just knew how to make friends. It was a good movie, said the friends. We really liked it. She hugged them and they stayed for a long time. Janet was as happy as she ever remembered being in her life.

#15

When they disappeared again, Janet saved the film in a little canister and put it away for safekeeping. She spent many hours reading over her notebook. It *was* a good film; it brought her friends back. That knowledge filled her with joy.

#16

Eventually, she started thinking about a new project to bring her friends back. She was pretty sure they would like a replica of the Golden Gate Bridge made out of toothpicks. After her next shift at the supermarket, she bought several dozen boxes of toothpicks and a lot of glue. ●

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In September 1993 we published one of Holly Wade's first stories, "The Cool Place." Since then, the author has married, added her husband's name to her byline, and moved from Clarksville, Arkansas, to Seattle, Washington. Ms. Matter returns to our pages with a strange tale about the goings-on at . . .

MR. PACIFAKER'S HOUSE

Holly Wade Matter

Illustration by Laurie Harden

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Sarcastic Talking Horse said: "What happened in there?"

"I remember lying on a black bed, in a vermillion room, staring up at the ceiling—a white ceiling, only it was shadowed, so that it really looked grey. Overcast grey. They way the sky looks on a 96 degrees Fahrenheit day, just before a storm, when the wind's so fierce the clouds *rush* at you. They rush down at you from the sky, and they tear, and they show the black beneath them."

"*Above* them."

"*Inside* them."

"I remember a brass ceiling fan with dark wooden blades. It spun so fast that the blades looked like they were going backward."

"I do that sometimes," said Sarcastic Talking Horse.

"I remember being so hot that I couldn't even move—so hot that I had to squint, to keep the sweat from pouring into my eyes. And I remember scissors."

"Scissors?"

"Fingernail scissors. They hung from the ceiling, by fine grey threads. They swayed in the wind from the fan. There were so many of them. Not millions, but surely thousands. I was supposed to count them. Each of them. Each of those thousands of swaying scissors."

"Did you do it?" asked Sarcastic Talking Horse.

"No."

"Did you die?"

"Yes."

Mr. Pacifaker was a fairy. He told her so himself, early on in their acquaintance. Garnet Manon Volentine, then eight years old, was surprised. She'd assumed all fairies were tiny ladies just like Tinkerbell. Mr. Pacifaker was regular grown-up size, and he was a man, and an old man at that. But she had been raised to be polite to all adult creatures, so she didn't question him. Eventually, she accepted his statement as truth. After all, he didn't behave like regular adults.

Garnet Manon used to visit Mr. Pacifaker when her mother didn't know. She would say she was walking down to the library, but instead she'd duck into Mr. Pacifaker's scrubby yard, where he'd be half-in, half-out of his primer-gray 1952 Ford pickup, talking to his horse, a ribsy chestnut gelding without a name. Mr. Pacifaker's horse was tethered to the fender, because Mr. Pacifaker didn't have a fence. He never rode his horse. He never drove his truck.

Mr. Pacifaker seemed constantly poised to climb into the cab, constantly remembering something he'd left in his peeled-paint house that he needed to bring with him. Always teetering on the brink of departure,

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was Mr. Pacifaker. Always in-between. Garnet Manon would climb into the passenger side of the cab and talk to him there.

"I'm gonna leave you that house when I die," he'd tell her. "The First Pissbyterian Church wants it, or the lot, rather, so they can expand their fellowship hall. They say my house is full of rats, and my yard is full of manure, and they're right. I'm gonna leave you the rats and the manure, as well. I'm gonna leave you the horse and the truck and everything I got, Garnet Manon, because you've been so nice to this old fairy everybody else hates. But you got to promise me to stay away from them boys."

"I *do* stay away from them boys." She'd rather have said, *Them boys stay away from me*. Even at eight years, she knew the pain of exclusion. During "boys chase girls" at recess, she found herself running in circles and shouting, unnoticed, unchased, and alone.

"Good. Keep staying away. They're trouble, that's all, and I don't want no trouble in my house, even if I'm too dead to know about it."

Garnet Manon pictured boys running through Mr. Pacifaker's house, breaking the windows and frightening the rats.

"I will," she promised.

"What happened then?" said Sarcastic Talking Horse.

"Then," she said, "the room went black, and cold, and totally silent. Except that I didn't have eyes to see the blackness, or a body to feel the cold, or ears to hear the silence. I floated like a thought in the back of somebody's mind, halfway between expression and oblivion. I knew that if the somebody forgot me, I'd be gone forever. But I was afraid that they'd speak me, because I didn't know how I'd come out.

"Then there came a blinding light, like a bright headlight on a wet blacktop road, on a night when clouds smother the sky. It sped toward me faster than anything imaginable. I couldn't move. I didn't have time. It collided with me, and I came out the other side, with a scream that split me in two and fused me back together in a single heartbeat.

"When I opened my eyes, I was back in the vermillion room, on the black bed. The air was still hot, hotter than before, and the fan still spun it around the room.

"But each of the thousands of scissors had disappeared."

Garnet Manon had a spiral-bound notebook that she kept between her mattress and her box-spring. She had a special pen that spun smoothly across the pages, leaving perfect black words behind it. She used this pen to fill this notebook with speculations about Mr. Pacifaker's life, his house, and his horse.

Mr. Pacifaker had never invited her into his house, so there was nothing to contradict her fantasy. She imagined rooms larger than the house

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itself, paved in marble tiles of black and white and rose and green. She imagined a reflecting pool beneath a faceted crystal dome, the water shot full of prismatic sparks and darting silver serpents. She imagined arches and columns, spiral staircases, draperies of velvet and samite and silk. She imagined doors no higher than her waist that opened into broad and secret chambers. She imagined a half-moon balcony suspended over an abyss, where she would lean over the railing, picking pearls from a silver bowl, holding them between thumb and forefinger, dropping them into the abyss, listening, listening, yet never hearing them bounce and skitter against the bottom, because there was no bottom at all.

She imagined Mr. Pacifaker, the old fairy, as a mad builder, adding wings and chambers and secret passageways for her eventual delight. She imagined him storing his treasures there for her, arranging and draping and sequestering them in such a way that only she could find them.

And since, at that time, she devoured every fantasy novel she could lay her hands on, she imagined that Mr. Pacifaker's horse could talk, and that it was, as all talking horses, invariably sarcastic. She imagined that it would be her companion, carrying her through the ballrooms and chambers, up and down the stairs; and that it would watch after her and protect her after Mr. Pacifaker had journeyed to fairy heaven.

If wishes were horses, then beggars would ride. If horses were wishes, then Mr. Pacifaker was saving his for her.

He let his wish graze on the seared grass in his yard, let it display its ribs to the town so that nobody would envy it, want to steal it—as he let the paint peel and flake from his house, as he let the porch sag, as he let the rats run and play.

At thirteen, Garnet Manon understood disguises. She knew that heroines arose from unlikely origins, were scorned by their peers, and driven to free and reveal their true natures. She knew that she, too, was disguised.

She'd figured out what kind of fairy Mr. Pacifaker *really* was, but she pretended that she hadn't. She pretended that he really was the magic kind, and that he'd cast a disguising spell over her, to keep her safe from them boys. She pretended that the spell was benevolent, and would break as soon as the right boy came along. She pretended that Mr. Pacifaker would know the right boy when he saw him.

How else could she bear the acne that turned her face into a moonscape? How else could she stand her painful mouthful of braces? How else could she reconcile her name, Garnet Manon Volentine, a heroine's name, with the reflection of herself in the mirror, and in the sneering, faked love-words them boys yelled out at her to make her slouch and cry?

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"You stay away from them boys," Mr. Pacifaker warned her. "Don't you listen to their talk. They got one thing on their minds, and once they do it to you, they'll drop you like a hot potato, and then where the hell will you be?"

Garnet Manon slouched down on the seat. Her knees pressed up against the dashboard. "Nobody wants to do it to me," she muttered.

"Ha," said Mr. Pacifaker. "That's what *you* think."

"Then I got up off the bed," she said, "and I walked out of the room, and into the awful filthy falling-apart kitchen."

"He never let me in there," said Sarcastic Talking Horse, "so don't blame me."

"I wasn't. Anyway, there was Mr. Pacifaker, just as alive as you please, sitting on the counter between two stacks of dirty dishes. He didn't look any younger, but he seemed healthy, and kind of shiny. A pair of delicate iridescent wings grew from his back, and they fanned the air and made it cool and sweet.

" 'Don't gawk at me,' he said. 'I wouldn't look like this if you weren't so goddamned literal-minded.' "

Garnet Manon dreamed of French Canadian waltzes spiraling her across a ballroom floor. She had only heard one in her life, when she was thirteen years old—a duet of hammer dulcimer and folk guitar performed at the county fair. She'd found it more opulent than all the arts and crafts in the exhibition hall. She'd packed it and taken it with her to adulthood, though she remembered it not as music but as movement—the movement of the guitarist's hands as he picked and strummed, the movement of the dulcimer player's wrists as she lightly, rapidly hammered the strings, the movement of her own body, constricted by adolescent shyness. The energy of the music was stored in her body, tensed for release, as though every muscle and tendon were a rubber band pulled nearly to the breaking point.

She imagined defloration as thousands of tiny scissors snipping through each rubber band, orgasm as the sharp snap, a volley of little stings that burned and throbbed against the skin. "Defloration" was Mr. Pacifaker's word, "orgasm" belonged to *Cosmopolitan*.

Both gave her contradictory advice.

By the time she was eighteen, Garnet Manon had had it with Mr. Pacifaker's warnings against them boys. She figured he might as well warn her against being trampled to death by a woolly mammoth. She no longer pretended that he was any other kind of fairy than what he was. She no longer believed in benevolent spells.

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"Look at me," she said, slouched in the cab of his pickup. "Just you look at me, and tell me what the hell kind of boy would want anything to do with me. I'm *ugly*, Mr. Pacifaker. I'm as ugly as your house and your yard and your horse put together."

Mr. Pacifaker, leaning half in, half out of the cab, winced and shook his head. "You're seeing all wrong, girl."

"Ha!" she said angrily. "Me and all the rest of the world. *Them boys* laugh at me. They make fun of me. They say, 'You're so *beautiful*, Garnet Manon. I *love* you, Garnet Manon.' They want me to believe it, so they can laugh at me even more. I'm a joke, Mr. Pacifaker, not an object of desire."

"Didn't I tell you to stay away from them boys?" Mr. Pacifaker shouted. "Didn't I tell you they only wanted one thing? And here you ignore me completely and let them just deflower you like that."

"Nobody's deflowered me, Mr. Pacifaker!" Garnet Manon cried. "Nobody *wants* to deflower me! Don't you understand *anything?*"

"They done it to you," Mr. Pacifaker muttered, shaking his head.

Garnet Manon shrieked in frustration and punched open the passenger door. "You know what, Mr. Pacifaker? I finally got you figured out. And you know what I conclude about you? I conclude that all your life, you've waited for them boys to come along, to talk sweet to you, to seduce you and deflower you. But you know what? They never have, and they never will. And that's why you won't leave me alone about it. If you can hope for me, you can hope for yourself, too. But the truth is, you and I are every bit as ugly as we look, and every bit as ridiculous, and every bit as lonely. The only difference between us, aside from gender, is that you're going to die a virgin a lot sooner than I am, and that's the damned truth."

Mr. Pacifaker's body seemed to sag and shrink. His face aged before her eyes, as his own eyes filled with tears. He breathed hard for a long moment, and then he said, "Garnet Manon, I don't care if you seen it. I don't care if you know it. But did you really have to say it?"

Garnet Manon never went to see him again. They never made up. And so, when Mr. Pacifaker died, Garnet Manon was surprised to find out that he'd left her the house, horse, and yard in his will, witnessed, signed, and legal.

His lawyer brought her the deed and the front door key. Representatives from the First Presbyterian Church came hot on the lawyer's heels, offering a low sum they figured an eighteen-year-old would be dumb enough to take.

Garnet Manon said she'd think about it.

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"You can't live there," her mother said. "That house is, by all accounts, full of filth and rats."

"I don't want to live there," said Garnet Manon.

"Just think, if you sold it to the Presbyterians, you'd be able to go to college," said her mother.

"I don't want to go to college," said Garnet Manon.

"Then what *do* you want?" her mother demanded.

"I want to apologize to Mr. Pacifaker."

When the knacker came, inquiring after the horse, Garnet Manon slammed the door in his face, ran up to her room, and wept.

She walked down to Mr. Pacifaker's house that evening. She pulled two leaves of hay from the bale in the back of the pickup, shook them out for the horse, and patted its ribs as it ate. She wondered if the horse missed its daily conversations with Mr. Pacifaker. She wondered how on earth it had outlived him. It had been an old horse ten years ago.

"Don't worry," she told it. "I won't let the knacker have you."

She fingered the key in her pocket, learned its peaks and depressions, wondered if it were a token of forgiveness, an indication that Mr. Pacifaker hadn't had time to change his will, or simply a poke in the eye to the Presbyterians.

She thought of the spiral-bound notebook she'd filled as an adolescent, investing the house with all the beauties and graces she'd wished for herself, investing Mr. Pacifaker with a power he'd never had, investing the bitten, scrawny horse with nobility and wit.

If the inside of the house were really dreadful, she didn't want to have to see it. She didn't want to know the squalor he'd lived in.

She'd named his tragedy once, and it had killed him. As good as killed him. Nothing was disguised. Everything was real. Them boys would never come.

"I'm going in," she said to the horse. "If I fall through the floor, will you let somebody know?"

She fitted the key into the lock and turned it. She pushed against the door, lightly at first, then pressing her weight against it, until it screamed open and she staggered inside. She stumbled over a bundle of molding newspapers, and caught herself on an ancient television set, which groaned and collapsed. In the dim light filtered by grimy windows, she saw fat scurrying things on the floor, the coffee table, the exploded couch. Glowing white fungus crept up the stained wallpaper. The air was thick with dust and the smell of mildew.

"Oh, Mr. Pacifaker," she said sorrowfully.

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The bathroom, the kitchen, were just as bad. All around the house lay the debris of a man who cared only for the life in his head. Had them boys ever come to see him, he couldn't possibly have let them in.

One room remained unexplored—the bedroom, it must be, just off the kitchen, behind a closed door.

She opened the door and found the beauty in the core of the house, in the core of Mr. Pacifaker, the soaring vermillion chamber disguised by the squalor that surrounded it.

"I said, 'I'm sorry I killed you, Mr. Pacifaker.' And he said, 'I'm sorry you're so goddamned egotistical.' 'But didn't I break your heart and kill you?' 'No, I died of tetanus, just like it said in the paper.' "

She sighed and leaned her head against Sarcastic Talking Horse's neck.

"So I asked him about the room, and he told me to mind my own goddamned business, and I asked him about fairy heaven, and he said what did I care, I was never gonna get there. And I was about to walk out, and he told me to wait, and he chewed over his words, and then he said, 'Garnet Manon, there's bliss. There's bliss you can't even guess at. It's something you give yourself, something you carry around with you, and nobody can take it away unless you let them. You let them boys deflower you. You let them take away your bliss. And *that's* what I been warning you against all these years. And if you weren't so goddamned literal-minded, you'd have figured that out years ago.'

" 'So what do I do now?' I said.

" 'Take back your bliss,' he said, 'and keep it safe to your heart. You died in that room, Garnet Manon. You died, and you came back whole and free. Not many people get that chance. Don't let it go to waste.'

"And then he went all cranky on me again, and said, 'I'd advise you to sell the house to them Pissbyterians. Make 'em give you twice what they offered this afternoon. Part out the truck. Then take that horse and go. This town had nothing for me, and it's got nothing for you, either.'

" 'But your house! Your room!'

"He waved his hand and snorted. 'I don't need that no more, Garnet Manon. I got a better place now.' "

"And then what?" asked Sarcastic Talking Horse, when she had been silent for nearly two minutes.

"Then he just disappeared," she said.

When she came out of the house again, it was dawn. The horse's chestnut coat shone purple in the light. Its ribs seemed to have softened and melted beneath new flesh, sleek pelt.

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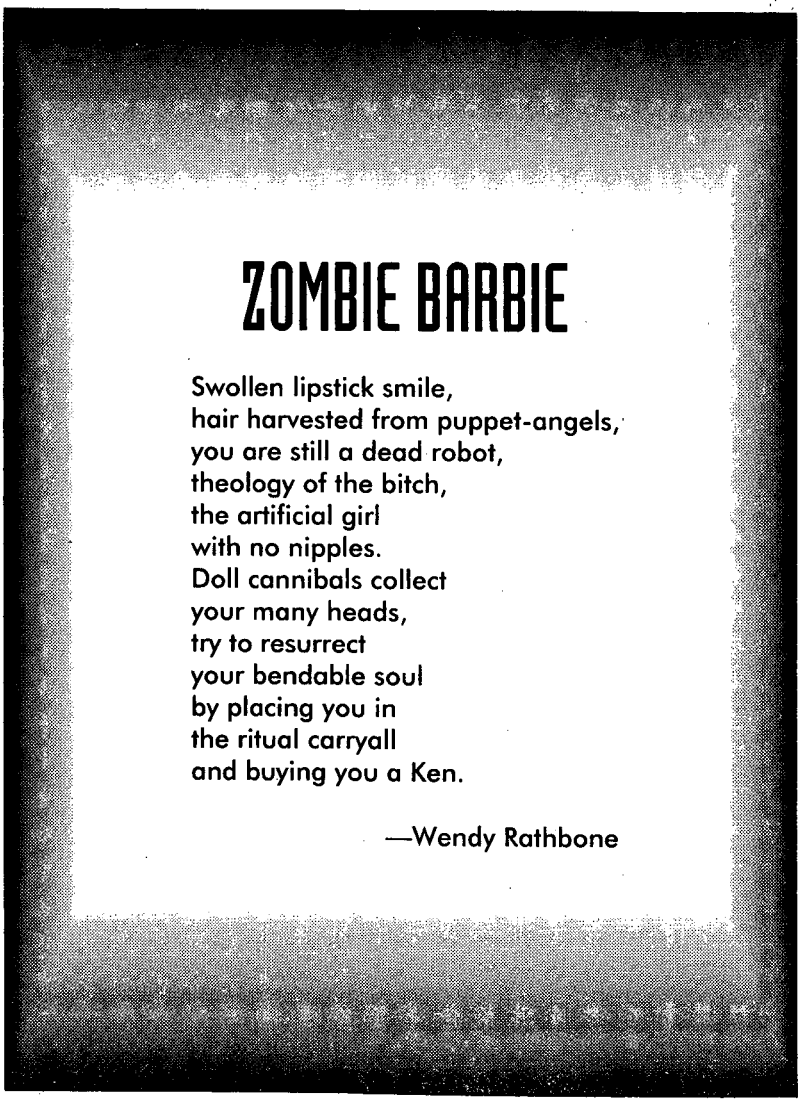
It had also chewed through its tether, and walked gracefully to meet her.

"How lovely you are," said Garnet Manon.

"What took you so long?" said Sarcastic Talking Horse. ●



ZOMBIE BARBIE

Swollen lipstick smile,
hair harvested from puppet-angels,
you are still a dead robot,
theology of the bitch,
the artificial girl
with no nipples.
Doll cannibals collect
your many heads,
try to resurrect
your bendable soul
by placing you in
the ritual carryall
and buying you a Ken.

—Wendy Rathbone

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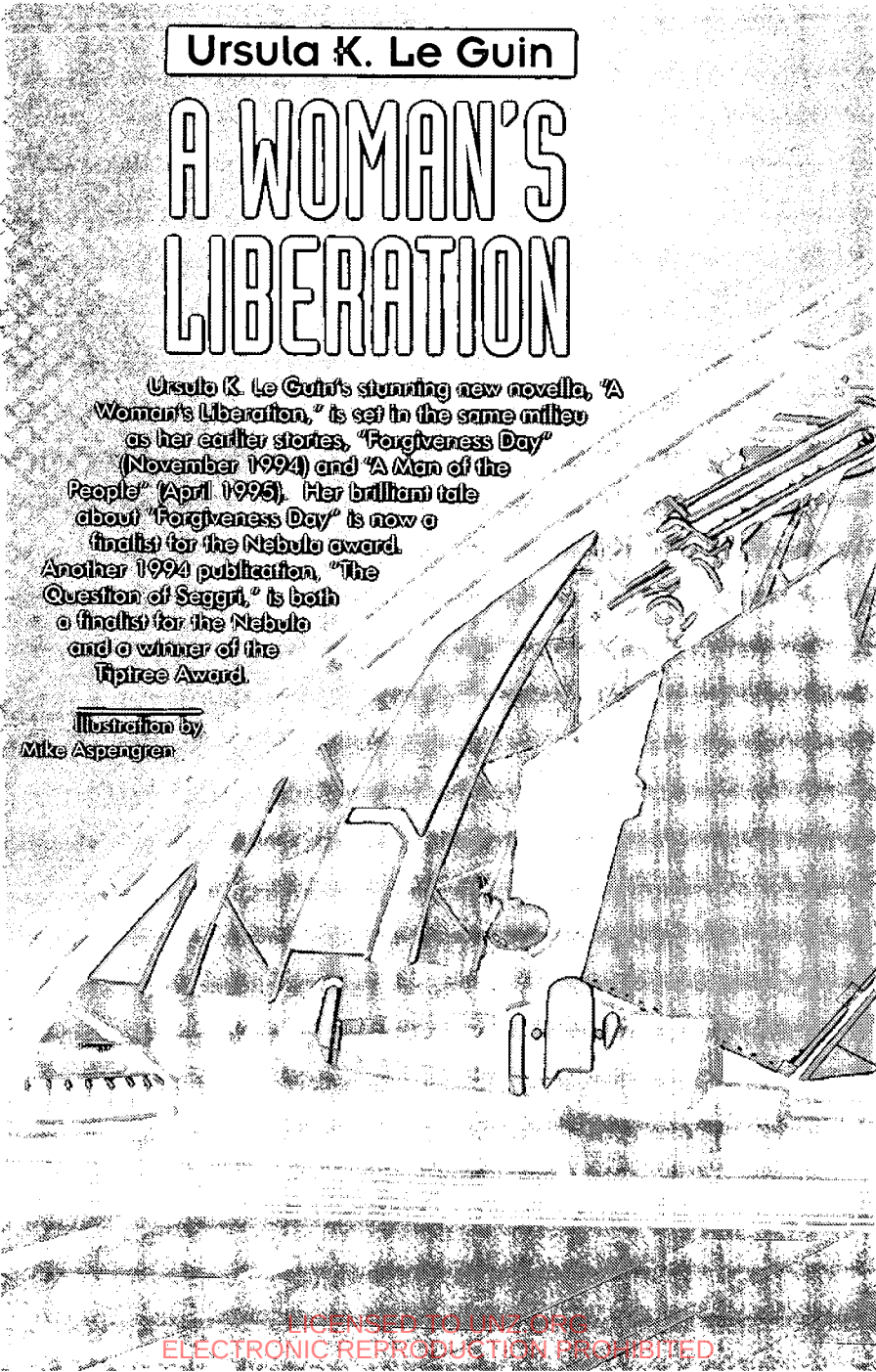
Ursula K. Le Guin

A WOMAN'S LIBERATION

Ursula K. Le Guin's stunning new novella, "A Woman's Liberation," is set in the same milieu as her earlier stories, "Forgiveness Day" (November 1994) and "A Man of the People" (April 1995). Her brilliant tale about "Forgiveness Day" is now a finalist for the Nebula award. Another 1994 publication, "The Question of Seggri," is both a finalist for the Nebula and a winner of the Tiptree Award.



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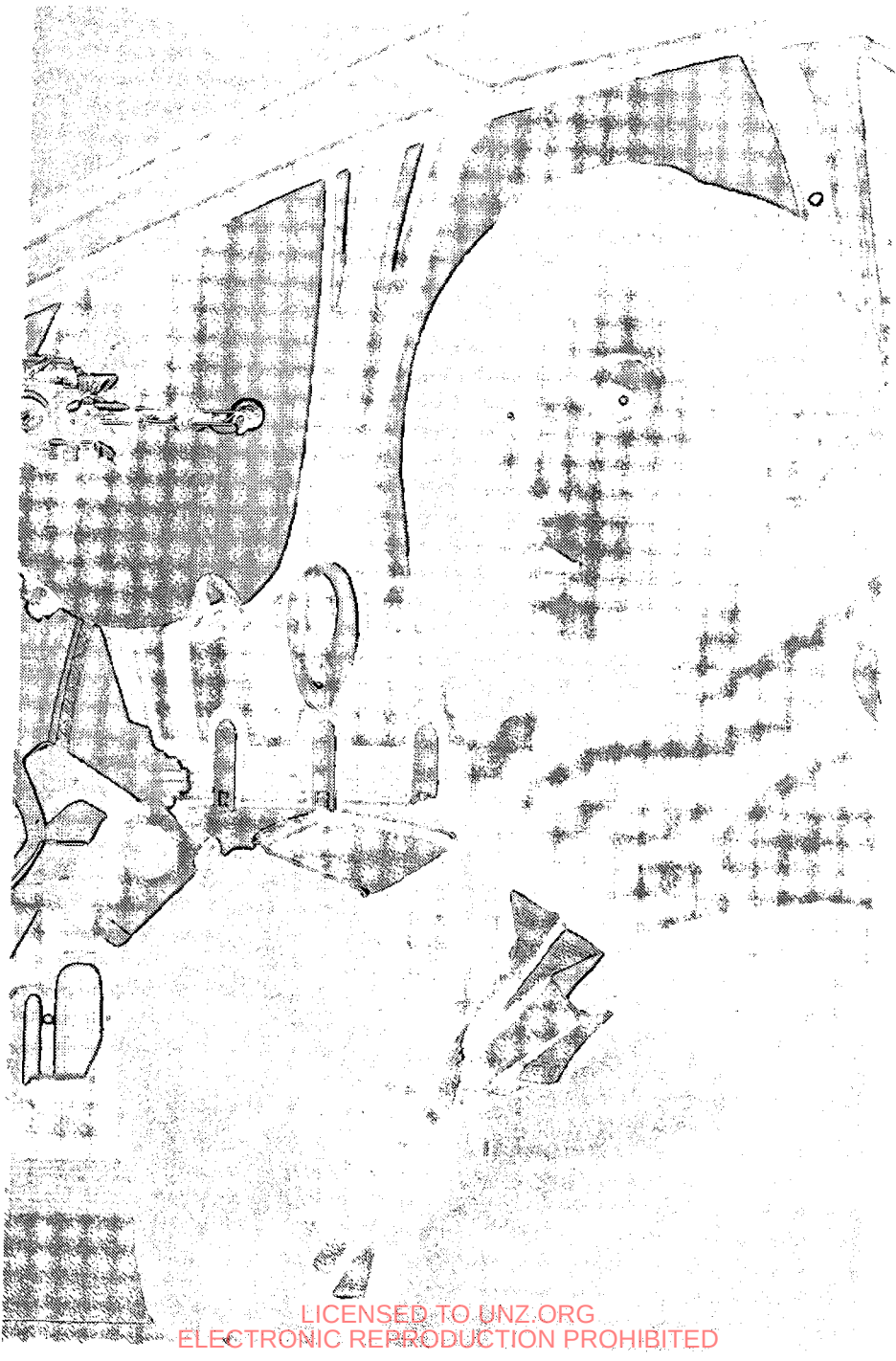

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1. Shomeke

My dear friend has asked me to write the story of my life, thinking it might be of interest to people of other worlds and times. I am an ordinary woman, but I have lived in years of mighty changes and have been advantaged to know with my very flesh the nature of servitude and the nature of freedom.

I did not learn to read or write until I was a grown woman, which is all the excuse I will make for the faults of my narrative.

I was born a slave on the planet Werel. As a child I was called Shomekes' Radosse Rakam. That is, Property of the Shomeke Family, Granddaughter of Dosse, Granddaughter of Kamye. The Shomeke family owned an estate on the eastern coast of Voe Deo. Dosse was my grandmother. Kamye is the Lord God.

The Shomekes possessed over four hundred assets, mostly used to cultivate the fields of gede, to herd the saltgrass cattle, in the mills, and as domestics in the House. The Shomeke family had been great in history. Our Owner was an important man politically, often away in the capital.

Assets took their name from their grandmother because it was the grandmother that raised the child. The mother worked all day, and there was no father. Women were always bred to more than one man. Even if a man knew his child he could not care for it. He might be sold or traded away at any time. Young men were seldom kept long on the estates. If they were valuable they were traded to other estates or sold to the factories. If they were worthless they were worked to death.

Women were not often sold. The young ones were kept for work and breeding, the old ones to raise the young and keep the compound in order. On some estates women bore a baby a year till they died, but on ours most had only two or three children. The Shomekes valued women as workers. They did not want the men always getting at the women. The grandmothers agreed with them and guarded the young women closely.

I say men, women, children, but you are to understand that we were not called men, women, children. Only our owners were called so. We assets or slaves were called bondsmen, bondswomen, and pups or young. I will use these words, though I have not heard or spoken them for many years, and never before on this blessed world.

The bondsmen's part of the compound, the gateside, was ruled by the Bosses, who were men, some relations of the Shomeke family, others hired by them. On the inside the young and the bondswomen lived. There two cutfrees, castrated bondsmen, were the Bosses in name, but the grandmothers ruled. Indeed nothing in the compound happened without the grandmothers' knowledge.

If the grandmothers said an asset was too sick to work, the Bosses would let that one stay home. Sometimes the grandmothers could save a bondsman from being sold away, sometimes they could protect a girl from being bred by more than one man, or could give a delicate girl a

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contraceptive. Everybody in the compound obeyed the counsel of the grandmothers. But if one of them went too far, the Bosses would have her flogged or blinded or her hands cut off. When I was a young child, there lived in our compound a woman we called Great-Grandmother, who had holes for eyes and no tongue. I thought that she was thus because she was so old. I feared that my grandmother Dosse's tongue would wither in her mouth. I told her that. She said, "No. It won't get any shorter, because I don't let it get too long."

I lived in the compound. My mother birthed me there, and was allowed to stay three months to nurse me; then I was weaned to cow's milk, and my mother returned to the House. Her name was Shomekes' Rayowa Yowa. She was lightskinned like most of the assets, but very beautiful, with slender wrists and ankles and delicate features. My grandmother too was light, but I was dark, darker than anybody else in the compound.

My mother came to visit, the cutfrees letting her in by their ladder-door. She found me rubbing grey dust on my body. When she scolded me, I told her that I wanted to look like the others.

"Listen, Rakam," she said to me, "they are dust people. They'll never get out of the dust. You're something better. And you will be beautiful. Why do you think you're so black?" I had no idea what she meant. "Some day I'll tell you who your father is," she said, as if she were promising me a gift. I had watched when the Shomekes' stallion, a prized and valuable animal, serviced mares from other estates. I did not know a father could be human.

That evening I boasted to my grandmother: "I'm beautiful because the black stallion is my father!" Dosse struck me across the head so that I fell down and wept. She said, "Never speak of your father."

I knew there was anger between my mother and my grandmother, but it was a long time before I understood why. Even now I am not sure I understand all that lay between them.

We little pups ran around in the compound. We knew nothing outside the walls. All our world was the bondswomen's huts and the bondsmen's longhouses, the kitchens and kitchen gardens, the bare plaza beaten hard by bare feet. To me, the stockade wall seemed a long way off.

When the field and mill hands went out the gate in the early morning I didn't know where they went. They were just gone. All day long the whole compound belonged to us pups, naked in the summer, mostly naked in the winter too, running around playing with sticks and stones and mud, keeping away from grandmothers, until we begged them for something to eat or they put us to work weeding the gardens for a while.

In the evening or the early night the workers would come back, trooping in the gate guarded by the Bosses. Some were worn out and grim, others would be cheerful and talking and calling back and forth. The great gate was slammed behind the last of them. Smoke went up from all the cooking stoves. The burning cowdung smelled sweet. People gathered on the porches of the huts and longhouses. Bondsmen and bondswomen lingered at the ditch that divided the gateside from the

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inside, talking across the ditch. After the meal the freedmen led prayers to Tual's statue, and we lifted our own prayers to Kamye, and then people went to their beds, except for those who lingered to "jump the ditch." Some nights, in the summer, there would be singing, or a dance was allowed. In the winter one of the grandfathers—poor old broken men, not strong people like the grandmothers—would "sing the word." That is what we called reciting the *Arkamye*. Every night, always, some of the people were teaching and others were learning the sacred verses. On winter nights one of these old worthless bondsmen kept alive by the grandmothers' charity would begin to sing the word. Then even the pups would be still to listen to that story.

The friend of my heart was Walsu. She was bigger than I, and was my defender when there were fights and quarrels among the young or when older pups called me "Blackie" and "Bossie." I was small but had a fierce temper. Together, Walsu and I did not get bothered much. Then Walsu was sent out the gate. Her mother had been bred and was now stuffed big, so that she needed help in the fields to make her quota. Gede must be hand harvested. Every day as a new section of the bearing stalk comes ripe it has to be picked, and so gede pickers go through the same field over and over for twenty or thirty days, and then move on to a later planting. Walsu went with her mother to help her pick her rows. When her mother fell ill, Walsu took her place, and with help from other hands she kept up her mother's quota. She was then six years old by owner's count, which gave all assets the same birthday, new year's day at the beginning of spring. She might have truly been seven. Her mother remained ill both before birthing and after, and Walsu took her place in the gede field all that time. She never afterward came back to play, only in the evenings to eat and sleep. I saw her then and we could talk. She was proud of her work. I envied her and longed to go through the gate. I followed her to it and looked through it at the world. Now the walls of the compound seemed very close.

I told my grandmother Dosse that I wanted to go to work in the fields.

"You're too young."

"I'll be seven at the new year."

"Your mother made me promise not to let you go out."

Next time my mother visited the compound, I said, "Grandmother won't let me go out. I want to go work with Walsu."

"Never," my mother said. "You were born for better than that."

"What for?"

"You'll see."

She smiled at me. I knew she meant the House, where she worked. She had told me often of the wonderful things in the House, things that shone and were colored brightly, things that were thin and delicate, clean things. It was quiet in the House, she said. My mother herself wore a beautiful red scarf, her voice was soft, and her clothing and body were always clean and fresh.

"When will I see?"

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I teased her until she said, "All right! I'll ask my lady."

"Ask her what?"

All I knew of my-lady was that she too was delicate and clean, and that my mother belonged to her in some particular way, of which she was proud. I knew my-lady had given my mother the red scarf.

"I'll ask her if you can come begin training at the House."

My mother said "the House" in a way that made me see it as a great sacred place like the place in our prayer: *May I enter in the clear house, in the rooms of peace.*

I was so excited I began to dance and sing, "I'm going to the House, to the House!" My mother slapped me to make me stop and scolded me for being wild. She said, "You are too young! You can't behave! If you get sent away from the House you can never come back."

I promised to be old enough.

"You must do everything right," Yowa told me. "You must do everything I say when I say it. Never question. Never delay. If my lady sees that you're wild, she'll send you back here. And that will be the end of you forever."

I promised to be tame. I promised to obey at once in everything, and not to speak. The more frightening she made it, the more I desired to see the wonderful, shining House.

When my mother left I did not believe she would speak to my-lady. I was not used to promises being kept. But after some days she returned, and I heard her speaking to my grandmother. Dosse was angry at first, speaking loudly. I crept under the window of the hut to listen. I heard my grandmother weep. I was frightened and amazed. My grandmother was patient with me, always looked after me, and fed me well. It had never entered my mind that there was anything more to it than that, until I heard her crying. Her crying made me cry, as if I were part of her.

"You could let me keep her one more year," she said. "She's just a baby. I would never let her out the gate." She was pleading, as if she were powerless, not a grandmother. "She is my joy, Yowa!"

"Don't you want her to do well, then?"

"Just a year more. She's too wild for the House."

"She's run wild too long. She'll get sent out to the fields if she stays. A year of that and they won't have her at the House. She'll be dust. Anyhow, there's no use crying about it. I asked my lady, and she's expected. I can't go back without her."

"Yowa, don't let her come to harm," Dosse said very low, as if ashamed to say this to her daughter, and yet with strength in her voice.

"I'm taking her to keep her out of harm," my mother said. Then she called me, and I wiped my tears and came.

It is queer, but I do not remember my first walk through the world outside the compound or my first sight of the House. I suppose I was frightened and kept my eyes down, and everything was so strange to me that I did not understand what I saw. I know it was a number of days before my mother took me to show me to Lady Tazeu. She had to scrub

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me and train me and make sure I would not disgrace her. I was terrified when at last she took my hand, scolding me in a whisper all the time, and brought me out of the bondswomen's quarters, through halls and doorways of painted wood, into a bright, sunny room with no roof, full of flowers growing in pots.

I had hardly ever seen a flower, only the weeds in the kitchen gardens, and I stared and stared at them. My mother had to jerk my hand to make me look at the woman lying in a chair among the flowers, in clothes soft and brightly colored like the flowers. I could hardly tell them apart. The woman's hair was long and shining, and her skin was shining and black. My mother pushed me, and I did what she had made me practice over and over: I went and knelt down beside the chair and waited, and when the woman put out her long, narrow, soft hand, black above and azure on the palm, I touched my forehead to it. I was supposed to say "I am your slave Rakam, Ma'am," but my voice would not come out.

"What a pretty little thing," she said, "So dark." Her voice changed a little on the last words.

"The Bosses came in . . . that night," Yowa said in a timid, smiling way, looking down as if embarrassed.

"No doubt about that," the woman said. I was able to glance up at her again. She was beautiful. I did not know a person could be so beautiful. I think she saw my wonder. She put out her long, soft hand again and caressed my cheek and neck. "Very, very pretty, Yowa," she said. "You did quite right to bring her here. Has she been bathed?"

She would not have asked that if she had seen me when I first came, filthy and smelling of the cowdung we made our fires with. She knew nothing of the compound at all. She knew nothing beyond the beza, the women's side of the House. She was kept there just as I had been kept in the compound, ignorant of anything outside. She had never smelled cowdung, as I had never seen flowers.

My mother assured her I was clean, and she said, "Then she can come to bed with me tonight. I'd like that. Will you like to come sleep with me, pretty little—" She glanced at my mother, who murmured, "Rakam." Ma'am pursed her lips at the name. "I don't like that," she murmured. "So ugly. Toti. Yes. You can be my new Toti. Bring her this evening. Yowa."

She had had a foxdog called Toti, my mother told me. Her pet had died. I did not know animals ever had names, and so it did not seem odd to me to be given an animal's name, but it did seem strange at first not to be Rakam. I could not think of myself as Toti.

That night my mother bathed me again and oiled my skin with sweet oil and dressed me in a soft gown, softer even than her red scarf. Again she scolded and warned me, but she was excited, too, and pleased with me, as we went to the beza again, through other halls, meeting some other bondswomen on the way, and to the lady's bedroom. It was a wonderful room, hung with mirrors and draperies and paintings. I did not understand what the mirrors were, or the paintings, and was frightened

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when I saw people in them. Lady Tazeu saw that I was frightened. "Come, little one," she said, making a place for me in her great, wide, soft bed strewn with pillows, "come and cuddle up." I crawled in beside her, and she stroked my hair and skin and held me in her warm, soft arms until I was comfortable and at ease. "There, there, little Toti," she said, and so we slept.

I became the pet of Lady Tazeu Wehoma Shomeke. I slept with her almost every night. Her husband was seldom home and when he was there did not come to her, preferring bondswomen for his pleasure. Sometimes she had my mother or other, younger bondswomen come into her bed, and she sent me away at those times, until I was older, ten or eleven, when she began to keep me and have me join in with them, teaching me how to be pleasured. She was gentle, but she was the mistress in love, and I was her instrument which she played.

I was also trained in household arts and duties. She taught me to sing with her, as I had a true voice. All those years I was never punished and never made to do hard work. I who had been wild in the compound was perfectly obedient in the Great House. I had been rebellious to my grandmother and impatient of her commands, but whatever my lady ordered me to do I gladly did. She held me fast to her by the only kind of love she had to give me. I thought that she was the Merciful Tual come down upon the earth. That is not a way of speaking, that is the truth. I thought she was a higher being, superior to myself.

Perhaps you will say that I could not or should not have had pleasure in being used without my consent by my mistress, and if I did I should not speak of it, showing even so little good in so great an evil. But I knew nothing of consent or refusal. Those are freedom words.

She had one child, a son, three years older than I. She lived quite alone among us bondswomen. The Wehomas were nobles of the Islands, old-fashioned people whose women did not travel, so she was cut off from her family. The only company she had was when Owner Shomeke brought friends with him from the capital, but those were all men, and she could be with them only at table.

I seldom saw the Owner and only at a distance. I thought he too was a superior being, but a dangerous one.

As for Erod, the Young Owner, we saw him when he came to visit his mother daily or when he went out riding with his tutors. We girls would peep at him and giggle to each other when we were eleven or twelve, because he was a handsome boy, nightblack and slender like his mother. I knew that he was afraid of his father, because I had heard him weep when he was with his mother. She would comfort him with candy and caresses, saying, "He'll be gone again soon, my darling." I too felt sorry for Erod, who was like a shadow, soft and harmless. He was sent off to school for a year at fifteen, but his father brought him back before the year was up. Bondsmen told us the Owner had beaten him cruelly and had forbidden him even to ride off the estate.

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Bondswomen whom the Owner used told us how brutal he was, showing us where he had bruised and hurt them. They hated him, but my mother would not speak against him. "Who do you think you are?" she said to a girl who was complaining of his use of her. "A lady to be treated like glass?" And when the girl found herself pregnant, stuffed was the word we used, my mother had her sent back to the compound. I did not understand why. I thought Yowa was hard and jealous. Now I think she was also protecting the girl from our lady's jealousy.

I do not know when I understood that I was the Owner's daughter. Because she had kept that secret from our lady, my mother believed it was a secret from all. But the bondswomen all knew it. I do not know what I heard or overheard, but when I saw Erod, I would study him and think that I looked much more like our father than he did, for by then I knew what a father was. And I wondered that Lady Tazeu did not see it. But she chose to live in ignorance.

During these years I seldom went to the compound. After I had been a halfyear or so at the House, I was eager to go back and see Walsu and my grandmother and show them my fine clothes and clean skin and shining hair; but when I went, the pups I used to play with threw dirt and stones at me and tore my clothes. Walsu was in the fields. I had to hide in my grandmother's hut all day. I never wanted to go back. When my grandmother sent for me, I would go only with my mother and always stayed close by her. The people in the compound, even my grandmother, came to look coarse and foul to me. They were dirty and smelled strongly. They had sores, scars from punishment, lopped fingers, ears, or noses. Their hands and feet were coarse, with deformed nails. I was no longer used to people who looked so. We domestics of the Great House were entirely different from them, I thought. Serving the higher beings, we became like them.

When I was thirteen and fourteen Lady Tazeu still kept me in her bed, making love to me often. But also she had a new pet, the daughter of one of the cooks, a pretty little girl though white as clay. One night she made love to me for a long time in ways that she knew gave me great ecstasy of the body. When I lay exhausted in her arms she whispered "goodbye, goodbye," kissing me all over my face and breasts. I was too spent to wonder at this.

The next morning my lady called in my mother and myself to tell us that she intended to give me to her son for his seventeenth birthday. "I shall miss you terribly, Toti darling," she said, with tears in her eyes. "You have been my joy. But there isn't another girl on the place that I could let Erod have. You are the cleanest, dearest, sweetest of them all. I know you are a virgin," she meant a virgin to men, "and I know my boy will enjoy you. And he'll be kind to her, Yowa," she said earnestly to my mother. My mother bowed and said nothing. There was nothing she could say. And she said nothing to me. It was too late to speak of the secret she had been so proud of.

Lady Tazeu gave me medicine to prevent conception, but my mother,

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not trusting the medicine, went to my grandmother and brought me contraceptive herbs. I took both faithfully that week.

If a man in the House visited his wife he came to the beza, but if he wanted a bondswoman she was "sent across." So on the night of the Young Owner's birthday I was dressed all in red and led over, for the first time in my life, to the men's side of the House.

My reverence for my lady extended to her son, and I had been taught that owners were superior by nature to us. But he was a boy whom I had known since childhood, and I knew that his blood and mine were half the same. It gave me a strange feeling toward him.

I thought he was shy, afraid of his manhood. Other girls had tried to tempt him and failed. The women had told me what I was to do, how to offer myself and encourage him, and I was ready to do that. I was brought to him in his great bedroom, all of stone carved like lace, with high, thin windows of violet glass. I stood timidly near the door for a while, and he stood near a table covered with papers and screens. He came forward at last, took my hand, and led me to a chair. He made me sit down, and spoke to me standing, which was all improper, and confused my mind.

"Rakam," he said—"that's your name, isn't it?"—I nodded—"Rakam, my mother means only kindness, and you must not think me ungrateful to her, or blind to your beauty. But I will not take a woman who cannot freely offer herself. Intercourse between owner and slave is rape." And he talked on, talking beautifully, as when my lady read aloud from one of her books. I did not understand much, except that I was to come whenever he sent for me and sleep in his bed, but he would never touch me. And I was not to speak of this to anyone. "I am sorry, I am very sorry to ask you to lie," he said, so earnestly that I wondered if it hurt him to lie. That made him seem more like a god than a human being. If it hurt to lie, how could you stay alive?

"I will do just as you say, Lord Erod," I said.

So, most nights, his bondsmen came to bring me across. I would sleep in his great bed, while he worked at the papers on his table. He slept on a couch beneath the windows. Often he wanted to talk to me, sometimes for a long time, telling me his ideas. When he was in school in the capital he had become a member of a group of owners who wished to abolish slavery, called The Community. Getting wind of this, his father had ordered him out of school, sent him home, and forbidden him to leave the estate. So he too was a prisoner. But he corresponded constantly with others in The Community through the net, which he knew how to operate without his father's knowledge, or the government's.

His head was so full of ideas he had to speak them. Often Geu and Ahas, the young bondsmen who had grown up with him, who always came to fetch me across, stayed with us while he talked to all of us about slavery and freedom and many other things. Often I was sleepy, but I did listen, and heard much I did not know how to understand or even believe. He told us there was an organization among assets, called the Hame, that worked to steal slaves from the plantations. These slaves

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would be brought to members of The Community, who would make out false papers of ownership and treat them well, renting them to decent work in the cities. He told us about the cities, and I loved to hear all that. He told us about Yeowe Colony, saying that there was a revolution there among the slaves.

Of Yeowe I knew nothing. It was a great blue-green star that set after the sun or rose before it, brighter than the smallest of the moons. It was a name in an old song they sang in the compound:

O, O, Ye-o-we,
Nobody never comes back.

I had no idea what a revolution was. When Erod told me that it meant that assets on plantations in this place called Yeowe were fighting their owners, I did not understand how assets could do that. From the beginning it was ordained that there should be higher and lower beings, the Lord and the human, the man and the woman, the owner and the owned. All my world was Shomeke Estate and it stood on that one foundation. Who would want to overturn it? Everyone would be crushed in the ruins.

I did not like Erod to call assets slaves, an ugly word that took away our value. I decided in my mind that here on Werel we were assets, and in that other place, Yeowe Colony, there were slaves, worthless bondspeople, intractables. That was why they had been sent there. It made good sense.

By this you know how ignorant I was. Sometimes Lady Tazeu had let us watch shows on the holonet with her, but she watched only dramas, not the reports of events. Of the world beyond the estate I knew nothing but what I learned from Erod, and that I could not understand.

Erod liked us to argue with him. He thought it meant our minds were growing free. Geu was good at it. He would ask questions like, "But if there's no assets who'll do the work?" Then Erod could answer at length. His eyes shone, his voice was eloquent. I loved him very much when he talked to us. He was beautiful and what he said was beautiful. It was like hearing the old men "singing the word," reciting the *Arkamye,* when I was a little pup in the compound.

I gave the contraceptives my lady gave me every month to girls who needed them. Lady Tazeu had aroused my sexuality and accustomed me to being used sexually. I missed her caresses. But I did not know how to approach any of the bondswomen, and they were afraid to approach me, since I belonged to the Young Owner. Being with Erod often, while he talked I yearned to him in my body. I lay in his bed and dreamed that he came and stooped over me and did with me as my lady used to do. But he never touched me.

Geu also was a handsome young man, clean and well-mannered, rather dark-skinned, attractive to me. His eyes were always on me. But he would not approach me, until I told him that Erod did not touch me.

Thus I broke my promise to Erod not to tell anyone; but I did not think myself bound to keep promises, as I did not think myself bound to speak the truth. Honor of that kind was for owners, not for us.

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After that, Geu used to tell me when to meet him in the attics of the House. He gave me little pleasure. He would not penetrate me, believing that he must save my virginity for our master. He had me take his penis in my mouth instead. He would turn away in his climax, for the slave's sperm must not defile the master's woman. That is the honor of a slave.

Now you may say in disgust that my story is all of such things, and there is far more to life, even a slave's life, than sex. That is very true. I can say only that it may be in our sexuality that we are most easily enslaved, both men and women. It may be there, even as free men and women, that we find freedom hardest to keep. The politics of the flesh are the roots of power.

I was young, full of health and desire for joy. And even now, even here, when I look back across the years from this world to that, to the compound and the House of Shomeke, I see images like those in a bright dream. I see my grandmother's big, hard hands. I see my mother smiling, the red scarf about her neck. I see my lady's black, silky body among the cushions. I smell the smoke of the cowdung fires, and the perfumes of the beza. I feel the soft, fine clothing on my young body, and my lady's hands and lips. I hear the old men singing the word, and my voice twining with my lady's voice in a love song, and Erod telling us of freedom. His face is illuminated with his vision. Behind him the windows of stone lace and violet glass keep out the night. I do not say I would go back. I would die before I would go back to Shomeke. I would die before I left this free world, my world, to go back to the place of slavery. But whatever I knew in my youth of beauty, of love, and of hope, was there.

And there it was betrayed. All that is built upon that foundation in the end betrays itself.

I was sixteen years old in the year the world changed.

The first change I heard about was of no interest to me except that my lord was excited about it, and so were Geu and Ahas and some of the other young bondsmen. Even my grandmother wanted to hear about it when I visited her. "That Yeowe, that slave world," she said, "they made freedom? They sent away their owners? They opened the gates? My lord, sweet Lord Kamye, how can that be? Praise his name, praise his marvels!" She rocked back and forth as she squatted in the dust, her arms about her knees. She was an old, shrunken woman now. "Tell me!" she said.

I knew little else to tell her. "All the soldiers came back here," I said. "And those other people, those alemens, they're there on Yeowe. Maybe they're the new owners. That's all somewhere way out there," I said, flipping my hand at the sky.

"What's alemens?" my grandmother asked, but I did not know. It was all mere words to me.

But when our Owner, Lord Shomeke, came home sick, that I understood. He came on a flyer to our little port. I saw him carried by on a stretcher, the whites showing in his eyes, his black skin mottled grey. He was dying of a sickness that was ravaging the cities. My mother,

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sitting with Lady Tazeu, saw a politician on the net who said that the alemens had brought the sickness to Werel. He talked so fearsomely that we thought everybody was going to die. When I told Geu about it he snorted. "Aliens, not alemens," he said, "and they've got nothing to do with it. My lord talked with the doctors. It's just a new kind of pusworm."

That dreadful disease was bad enough. We knew that any asset found to be infected with it was slaughtered at once like an animal and the corpse burned on the spot.

They did not slaughter the Owner. The House filled with doctors, and Lady Tazeu spent day and night by her husband's bed. It was a cruel death. It went on and on. Lord Shomeke in his suffering made terrible sounds, screams, howls. One would not believe a man could cry out hour after hour as he did. His flesh ulcerated and fell away, he went mad, but he did not die.

As Lady Tazeu became like a shadow, worn and silent, Erod filled with strength and excitement. Sometimes when we heard his father howling his eyes would shine. He would whisper, "Lady Tual have mercy on him," but he fed on those cries. I knew from Geu and Ahas, who had been brought up with him, how the father had tormented and despised him, and how Erod had vowed to be everything his father was not and to undo all he did.

But it was Lady Tazeu who ended it. One night she sent away the other attendants, as she often did, and sat alone with the dying man. When he began his moaning howl, she took her little sewing-knife and cut his throat. Then she cut the veins in her arms across and across, and lay down by him, and so died. My mother was in the next room all night. She said she wondered a little at the silence, but was so weary that she fell asleep; and in the morning she went in and found them lying in their cold blood.

All I wanted to do was weep for my lady, but everything was in confusion. Everything in the sickroom must be burned, the doctors said, and the bodies must be burned without delay. The House was under quarantine, so only the priests of the House could hold the funeral. No one was to leave the estate for twenty days. But several of the doctors themselves left when Erod, who was now Lord Shomeke, told them what he intended to do. I heard some confused word of it from Ahas, but in my grief I paid little heed.

That evening, all the House assets stood outside the Lady's Chapel during the funeral service to hear the songs and prayers within. The Bosses and cutfrees had brought the people from the compound, and they stood behind us. We saw the procession come out, the white biers carried by, the pyres lighted, and the black smoke go up. Long before the smoke ceased rising, the new Lord Shomeke came to us all where we stood.

Erod stood up on the little rise of ground behind the chapel and spoke in a strong voice such as I had never heard from him. Always in the House it had been whispering in the dark. Now it was broad day and a

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strong voice. He stood there black and straight in his white mourning clothes. He was not yet twenty years old. He said, "Listen, you people: you have been slaves, you will be free. You have been my property, you will own your own lives now. This morning I sent to the Government the Order of Manumission for every asset on the estate, four hundred and eleven men, women, and children. If you will come to my office in the Counting House in the morning, I will give you your papers. Each of you is named in those papers as a free person. You can never be enslaved again. You are free to do as you please from tomorrow on. There will be money for each one of you to begin your new life with. Not what you deserve, not what you have earned in all your work for us, but what I have to give you. I am leaving Shomeke. I will go to the capital, where I will work for the freedom of every slave on Werel. The Freedom Day that came to Yeowe is coming to us, and soon. Any of you who wish to come with me, come! There's work for us all to do!"

I remember all he said. Those are his words as he spoke them. When one does not read and has not had one's mind filled up by the images on the nets, words spoken strike down deep in the mind.

There was such a silence when he stopped speaking as I had never heard.

One of the doctors began talking, protesting to Erod that he must not break the quarantine.

"The evil has been burned away," Erod said, with a great gesture to the black smoke rising. "This has been an evil place, but no more harm will go forth from Shomeke!"

At that a slow sound began among the compound people standing behind us, and it swelled into a great noise of jubilation mixed with wailing, crying, shouting, singing. "Lord Kamye! Lord Kamye!" the men shouted. An old woman came forward: my grandmother. She strode through us House assets as if we were a field of grain. She stopped a good way from Erod. People fell silent to listen to the grandmother. She said, "Lord Master, are you turning us out of our homes?"

"No," he said. "They are yours. The land is yours to use. The profit of the fields is yours. This is your home, and you are free!"

At that the shouts rose up again so loud I cowered down and covered my ears, but I was crying and shouting too, praising Lord Erod and Lord Kamye in one voice with the rest of them.

We danced and sang there in sight of the burning pyres until the sun went down. At last the grandmothers and the freedmen got the people to go back to the compound, saying they did not have their papers yet. We domestics went straggling back to the House, talking about tomorrow, when we would get our freedom and our money and our land.

All that next day Erod sat in the Counting House and made out the papers for each slave and counted out the same amount of money for each: a hundred kue in cash, and a draft for five hundred kue on the district bank, which could not be drawn for forty days. This was, he

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explained to each one, to save them from exploitation by the unscrupulous before they knew how best to use their money. He advised them to form a cooperative, to pool their funds, to run the estate democratically. "Money in the bank, Lord!" an old crippled man came out crying, jigging on his twisted legs. "Money in the bank, Lord!"

If they wanted, Erod said over and over, they could save their money and contact the Hame, who would help them buy passage to Yeowe with it.

"O, O, Ye-o-we," somebody began singing, and they changed the words:

"Everybody's going to go.
O, O, Ye-o-we,
Everybody's going to go!"

They sang it all day long. Nothing could change the sadness of it. I want to weep now, remembering that song, that day.

The next morning Erod left. He could not wait to get away from the place of his misery and begin his life in the capital working for freedom. He did not say goodbye to me. He took Geu and Ahas with him. The doctors and their aides and assets had all left the day before. We watched his flyer go up into the air.

We went back to the House. It was like something dead. There were no owners in it, no masters, no one to tell us what to do.

My mother and I went in to pack up our clothing. We had said little to each other, but felt we could not stay there. We heard other women running through the beza, rummaging in Lady Tazeu's rooms, going through her closets, laughing and screaming with excitement, finding jewelry and valuables. We heard men's voices in the hall: Bosses's voices. Without a word my mother and I took what we had in our hands and went out by a back door, slipped through the hedges of the garden, and ran all the way to the compound.

The great gate of the compound stood wide open.

How can I tell you what that was to us, to see that, to see that gate stand open? How can I tell you?

2. Zeskra

Erod knew nothing about how the estate was run, because the Bosses ran it. He was a prisoner too. He had lived in his screens, his dreams, his visions.

The grandmothers and others in the compound had spent all that night trying to make plans, to draw our people together so they could defend themselves. That morning when my mother and I came, there were bondsmen guarding the compound with weapons made of farm tools. The grandmothers and cutfrees had made an election of a headman, a strong, well-liked field hand. In that way they hoped to keep the young men with them.

By the afternoon that hope was broken. The young men ran wild. They

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went up to the House to loot it. The Bosses shot them from the windows, killing many; the others fled away. The Bosses stayed holed up in the House, drinking the wine of the Shomekes. Owners of other plantations were flying reinforcements to them. We heard the flyers land, one after another. The bondswomen who had stayed in the House were at their mercy now.

As for us in the compound, the gates were closed again. We had moved the great bars from the outside to the inside, so we thought ourselves safe for the night at least. But in the midnight they came with heavy tractors and pushed down the wall, and a hundred men or more, our Bosses and owners from all the plantations of the region, came swarming in. They were armed with guns. We fought them with farm tools and pieces of wood. One or two of them were hurt or killed. They killed as many of us as they wanted to kill and then began to rape us. It went on all night.

A group of men took all the old women and men and held them and shot them between the eyes, the way they kill cattle. My grandmother was one of them. I do not know what happened to my mother. I did not see any bondsmen living when they took me away in the morning. I saw white papers lying in the blood on the ground. Freedom papers.

Several of us girls and young women still alive were herded into a truck and taken to the port-field. There they made us enter a flyer, shoving and using sticks, and we were carried off in the air. I was not then in my right mind. All I know of this is what the others told me later.

We found ourselves in a compound, like our compound in every way. I thought they had brought us back home. They shoved us in by the cutfrees' ladder. It was morning and the hands were out at work, only the grandmothers and pups and old men in the compound. The grandmothers came to us fierce and scowling. I could not understand at first why they were all strangers. I looked for my grandmother.

They were frightened of us, thinking we must be runaways. Plantation slaves had been running away, the last years, trying to get to the cities. They thought we were intractables and would bring trouble with us. But they helped us clean ourselves, and gave us a place near the cutfrees' tower. There were no huts empty, they said. They told us this was Zeskra Estate. They did not want to hear about what had happened at Shomeke. They did not want us to be there. They did not need our trouble.

We slept there on the ground without shelter. Some of the bondsmen came across the ditch in the night and raped us because there was nothing to prevent them from it, no one to whom we were of any value. We were too weak and sick to fight them. One of us, a girl named Abye, tried to fight. The men beat her insensible. In the morning she could not talk or walk. She was left there when the Bosses came and took us away. Another girl was left behind too, a big farmhand with white scars on her head like parts in her hair. As we were going I looked at her and saw that it was Walsu, who had been my friend. We had not recognized each other. She sat in the dirt, her head bowed down.

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Five of us were taken from the compound to the Great House of Zeskra, to the bondswomen's quarters. There for a while I had a little hope, since I knew how to be a good domestic asset. I did not know then how different Zeskra was from Shomeke. The House at Zeskra was full of people, full of owners and bosses. It was a big family, not a single Lord as at Shomeke but a dozen of them with their retainers and relations and visitors, so there might be thirty or forty men staying on the men's side and as many women in the beza, and a House staff of fifty or more. We were not brought as domestics, but as use-women.

After we were bathed we were left in the use-women's quarters, a big room without any private places. There were ten or more use-women already there. Those of them who liked their work were not glad to see us, thinking of us as rivals; others welcomed us, hoping we might take their places and they might be let join the domestic staff. But none were very unkind, and some were kind, giving us clothes, for we had been naked all this time, and comforting the youngest of us, Mio, a little compound girl of ten or eleven whose white body was mottled all over with brown and blue bruises.

One of them was a tall woman called Sezi-Tual. She looked at me with an ironic face. Something in her made my soul awaken.

"You're not a dusty," she said. "You're as black as old Lord Devil Zeskra himself. You're a Bossbaby, aren't you?"

"No ma'am," I said. "A Lord's child. And the Lord's child. My name is Rakam."

"Your Grandfather hasn't treated you too well lately," she said. "Maybe you should pray to the Merciful Lady Tual."

"I don't look for mercy," I said. From then on Sezi-Tual liked me, and I had her protection, which I needed.

We were sent across to the men's side most nights. When there were dinner parties, after the ladies left the dinner room we were brought in to sit on the owners' knees and drink wine with them. Then they would use us there on the couches or take us to their rooms. The men of Zeskra were not cruel. Some liked to rape, but most preferred to think that we desired them and wanted whatever they wanted. Such men could be satisfied, the one kind if we showed fear or submission, the other kind if we showed yielding and delight. But some of their visitors were another kind of man.

There was no law or rule against damaging or killing a use-woman. Her owner might not like it, but in his pride he could not say so: he was supposed to have so many assets that the loss of one or another did not matter at all. So some men whose pleasure lay in torture came to hospitable estates like Zeskra for their pleasure. Sezi-Tual, a favorite of the Old Lord, could and did protest to him, and such guests were not invited back. But while I was there, Mio, the little girl who had come with us from Shomeke, was murdered by a guest. He tied her down to the bed. He made the knot across her neck so tight that while he used her she strangled to death.

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I will say no more of these things. I have told what I must tell. There are truths that are not useful. All knowledge is local, my friend has said. Is it true, where is it true, that that child had to die in that way? Is it true, where is it true, that she did not have to die in that way?

I was often used by Lord Yaseo, a middle-aged man, who liked my dark skin, calling me "My Lady." Also he called me "Rebel," because what had happened at Shomeke they called a rebellion of the slaves. Nights when he did not send for me I served as a common-girl.

After I had been at Zeskra two years Sezi-Tual came to me one morning early. I had come back late from Lord Yaseo's bed. Not many others were there, for there had been a drinking party the night before, and all the common-girls had been sent for. Sezi-Tual woke me. She had strange hair, curly, in a bush. I remember her face above me, that hair curling out all about it. "Rakam," she whispered, "one of the visitor's assets spoke to me last night. He gave me this. He said his name is Suhame."

"Suhame," I repeated. I was sleepy. I looked at what she was holding out to me: some dirty crumpled paper. "I can't read!" I said, yawning, impatient.

But I looked at it and knew it. I knew what it said. It was the freedom paper. It was my freedom paper. I had watched Lord Erod write my name on it. Each time he wrote a name he had spoken it aloud so that we would know what he was writing. I remembered the big flourish of the first letter of both my names: Radosse Rakam. I took the paper in my hand, and my hand was shaking. "Where did you get this?" I whispered.

"Better ask this Suhame," she said. Now I heard what that name meant: "from the Hame." It was a password name. She knew that too. She was watching me, and she bent down suddenly and leaned her forehead against mine, her breath catching in her throat. "If I can I'll help," she whispered.

I met with "Suhame" in one of the pantries. As soon as I saw him I knew him: Ahas, who had been Lord Erod's favorite along with Geu. A slight, silent young man with dusty skin, he had never been much in my mind. He had watchful eyes, and I had thought when Geu and I spoke that he looked at us with ill will. Now he looked at me with a strange face, still watchful, yet blank.

"Why are you here with that Lord Boeba?" I said. "Aren't you free?"

"I am as free as you are," he said.

I did not understand him, then.

"Didn't Lord Erod protect even you?" I asked.

"Yes. I am a free man." His face began to come alive, losing that dead blankness it had when he first saw me. "Lady Boeba's a member of The Community. I work with the Hame. I've been trying to find people from Shomeke. We heard several of the women were here. Are there others still alive, Rakam?"

His voice was soft, and when he said my name my breath caught and my throat swelled. I said his name and went to him, holding him. "Ratual, Ramayo, Keo are still here," I said. He held me gently. "Walsu is

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in the compound," I said, "if she's still alive." I wept. I had not wept since Mio's death. He too was in tears.

We talked, then and later. He explained to me that we were indeed, by law, free, but that law meant nothing on the Estates. The government would not interfere between owners and those they claimed as their assets. If we claimed our rights the Zeskras would probably kill us, since they considered us stolen goods and did not want to be shamed. We must run away or be stolen away, and get to the city, the capital, before we could have any safety at all.

We had to be sure that none of the Zeskra assets would betray us out of jealousy or to gain favor. Sezi-Tual was the only one I trusted entirely.

Ahas arranged our escape with Sezi-Tual's help. I pleaded once with her to join us, but she thought that since she had no papers she would have to live always in hiding, and that would be worse than her life at Zeskra.

"You could go to Yeowe," I said.

She laughed. "All I know about Yeowe is nobody ever came back. Why run from one hell to the next one?"

Ratual chose not to come with us; she was a favorite of one of the young lords and content to remain so. Ramayo, the oldest of us from Shomeke, and Keo, who was now about fifteen, wanted to come. Sezi-Tual went down to the compound and found that Walsu was alive, working as a fieldhand. Arranging her escape was far more difficult than ours. There was no escape from a compound. She could get away only in daylight, in the fields, under the overseer's and the Boss's eyes. It was difficult even to talk to her, for the grandmothers were distrustful. But Sezi-Tual managed it, and Walsu told her she would do whatever she must do "to see her paper again."

Lady Boeba's flyer waited for us at the edge of a great gede field that had just been harvested. It was late summer. Ramayo, Keo, and I walked away from the House separately at different times of the morning. Nobody watched over us closely, as there was nowhere for us to go. Zeskra lies among other great estates, where a runaway slave would find no friends for hundreds of miles. One by one, taking different ways, we came through the fields and woods, crouching and hiding all the way to the flyer where Ahas waited for us. My heart beat and beat so I could not breathe. There we waited for Walsu.

"There!" said Keo, perched up on the wing of the flyer. She pointed across the wide field of stubble.

Walsu came running from the strip of trees on the far side of the field. She ran heavily, steadily, not as if she were afraid. But all at once she halted. She turned. We did not know why for a moment. Then we saw two men break from the shadow of the trees in pursuit of her.

She did not run from them, leading them toward us. She ran back at them. She leapt at them like a hunting cat. As she made that leap, one of them fired a gun. She bore one man down with her, falling. The other fired again and again. "In," Ahas said, "Now." We scrambled into the

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flyer and it rose into the air, seemingly all in one instant, the same instant in which Walsu made that great leap, she too rising into the air, into her death, into her freedom.

3. The City

I had folded up my freedom paper into a tiny packet. I carried it in my hand all the time we were in the flyer and while we landed and went in a public car through the city street. When Ahas found what I was clutching, he said I need not worry about it. Our manumission was on record in the Government Office and would be honored, here in the City. We were free people, he said. We were gareots, that is, owners who have no assets. "Just like Lord Erod," he said. That meant nothing to me. There was too much to learn. I kept hold of my freedom paper until I had a place to keep it safe. I have it still.

We walked a little way in the streets and then Ahas led us into one of the huge houses that stood side by side on the pavement. He called it a compound, but we thought it must be an owners' house. There a middle-aged woman welcomed us. She was pale-skinned, but talked and behaved like an owner, so that I did not know what she was. She said she was Ress, a rentswoman and an elderwoman of the house.

Rentspeople were assets rented out by their owners to a company. If they were hired by a big company they lived in the company compounds, but there were many, many rentspeople in the City who worked for small companies or businesses they managed themselves, and they occupied buildings run for profit, called open compounds. In such places the occupants must keep curfew, the doors being locked at night, but that was all; they were self-governed. This was such an open compound. It was supported by The Community. Some of the occupants were rentspeople, but many were like us, gareots who had been slaves. Over a hundred people lived there in forty apartments. It was supervised by several women, whom I would have called grandmothers, but here they were called elderwomen.

On the estates deep in the country, deep in the past, where the life was protected by miles of land and by the custom of centuries and by determined ignorance, any asset was absolutely at the mercy of any owner. From there we had come into this great crowd of two million people where nothing and nobody was protected from chance or change, where we had to learn as fast as we could how to stay alive, but where our life was in our own hands.

I had never seen a street. I could not read a word. I had much to learn.

Ress made that clear at once. She was a City woman, quick-thinking and quick-talking, impatient, aggressive, sensitive. I could not like or understand her for a long time. She made me feel stupid, slow, a clod. Often I was angry at her.

There was anger in me now. I had not felt anger while I lived at Zeskra.

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I could not. It would have eaten me. Here there was room for it, but I found no use for it. I lived with it in silence. Keo and Ramayo had a big room together, I had a small one next to theirs. I had never had a room to myself. At first I felt lonely in it and as if ashamed, but soon I came to like it. The first thing I did freely, as a free woman, was to shut my door.

Nights, I would shut my door and study. Days, we had work training in the morning, classes in the afternoon: reading and writing, arithmetic, history. My work training was in a small shop which made boxes of paper and thin wood to hold cosmetics, candles, jewelry, and such things. I was trained in all the different steps and crafts of making and ornamenting the boxes, for that is how most work was done in the City, by artisans who knew all their trade. The shop was owned by a member of The Community. The older workers were rentspeople. When my training was finished I too would be paid wages.

Till then Lord Erod supported me as well as Keo and Amayo and some men from Shomeke compound, who lived in a different house. Erod never came to the house. I think he did not want to see any of the people he had so disastrously freed. Ahas and Geu said he had sold most of the land at Shomeke and used the money for The Community and to make his way in politics, as there was now a Radical Party which favored emancipation.

Geu came a few times to see me. He had become a City man, dapper and knowing. I felt when he looked at me he was thinking I had been a use-woman at Zeskra, and I did not like to see him.

Ahas, whom I had never thought about in the old days, I now admired, knowing him brave, resolute, and kind. It was he who had looked for us, found us, rescued us. Owners had paid the money but Ahas had done it. He came often to see us. He was the only link that had not broken between me and my childhood.

And he came as a friend, a companion, never driving me back into my slave body. I was angry now at every man who looked at me as men look at women. I was angry at women who looked at me seeing me sexually. To Lady Tazeu all I had been was my body. At Zeskra that was all I had been. Even to Erod who would not touch me that was all I had been. Flesh to touch or not to touch, as they pleased. To use or not to use, as they chose. I hated the sexual parts of myself, my genitals and breasts and the swell of my hips and belly. Ever since I was a child, I had been dressed in soft clothing made to display all that sexuality of a woman's body. When I began to be paid and could buy or make my own clothing, I dressed in hard, heavy cloth. What I liked of myself was my hands, clever at their work, and my head, not clever at learning, but still learning, no matter how long it took.

What I loved to learn was history. I had grown up without any history. There was nothing at Shomeke or Zeskra but the way things were. Nobody knew anything about any time when things had been different.

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Nobody knew there was any place where things might be different. We were enslaved by the present time.

Erod had talked of change, indeed, but the owners were going to make the change. We were to be changed, we were to be freed, just as we had been owned. In history I saw that any freedom has been made, not given.

The first book I read by myself was a history of Yeowe, written very simply. It told about the days of the Colony, of the Four Corporations, of the terrible first century when the ships carried slave men to Yeowe and precious ores back. Slave men were so cheap then they worked them to death in a few years in the mines, bringing in new shipments continually. *O, O, Yeowe, nobody never comes back.* Then the Corporations began to send women slaves to work and breed, and over the years the assets spilled out of the compounds and made cities—whole great cities like this one I was living in. But not run by the owners or Bosses. Run by the assets, the way this house was run by us. On Yeowe the assets had belonged to the Corporations. They could rent their freedom by paying the Corporation a part of what they earned, the way sharecropper assets paid their owners in parts of Voe Deo. On Yeowe they called those assets freedpeople. Not free people, but freedpeople. And then, this history I was reading said, they began to think, why aren't we free people? So they made the revolution, the Liberation. It began on a plantation called Nadami, and spread from there. Thirty years they fought for their freedom. And just three years ago they had won the war, they had driven the Corporations, the owners, the bosses, off their world. They had danced and sung in the streets, freedom, freedom! This book I was reading (slowly, but reading it) had been printed there—there on Yeowe, the Free World. The Aliens had brought it to Werel. To me it was a sacred book.

I asked Ahas what it was like now on Yeowe, and he said they were making their government, writing a perfect Constitution to make all men equal under the Law.

On the net, on the news, they said they were fighting each other on Yeowe, there was no government at all, people were starving, savage tribesmen in the countryside and youth gangs in the cities running amuck, law and order broken down. Corruption, ignorance, a doomed attempt, a dying world, they said.

Ahas said that the Government of Voe Deo, which had fought and lost the war against Yeowe, now was afraid of a Liberation on Werel. "Don't believe any news," he counseled me. "Especially don't believe the neareals. Don't ever go into them. They're just as much lies as the rest, but if you feel and see a thing you will believe it. And they know that. They don't need guns if they own our minds." The owners had no reporters, no cameras on Yeowe, he said; they invented their "news," using actors. Only some of the aliens of the Ekumen were allowed on Yeowe, and the Yeowans were debating whether they should send them away, keeping the world they had won for themselves alone.

"But then what about us?" I said, for I had begun dreaming of going

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there, going to the Free World, when the Hame could charter ships and send people.

"Some of them say assets can come. Others say they can't feed so many, and would be overwhelmed. They're debating it democratically. It will be decided in the first Yeowan Elections, soon." Ahas was dreaming of going there too. We talked of our dream the way lovers talk of their love.

But there were no ships going to Yeowe now. The Hame could not act openly and The Community was forbidden to act for them. The Ekumen had offered transportation on their own ships to anyone who wanted to go, but the government of Voe Deo refused to let them use any space port for that purpose. They could carry only their own people. No Werelian was to leave Werel.

It had been only forty years since Werel had at last allowed the Aliens to land and maintain diplomatic relations. As I went on reading history I began to understand a little of the nature of the dominant people of Werel. The black-skinned race that conquered all the other peoples of the Great Continent, and finally all the world, those who call themselves the owners, have lived in the belief that there is only one way to be. They have believed they are what people should be, do as people should do, and know all the truth that is known. All the other peoples of Werel, even when they resisted them, imitated them, trying to become them, and so became their property. When a people came out of the sky looking differently, doing differently, knowing differently, and would not let themselves be conquered or enslaved, the owner race wanted nothing to do with them. It took them four hundred years to admit that they had equals.

I was in the crowd at a rally of the Radical Party, at which Erod spoke, as beautifully as ever. I noticed a woman beside me in the crowd listening. Her skin was a curious orange-brown, like the rind of a pini, and the whites showed in the corners of her eyes. I thought she was sick—I thought of the pusworm, how Lord Shomeke's skin had changed and his eyes had shown their whites. I shuddered and drew away. She glanced at me, smiling a little, and returned her attention to the speaker. Her hair curled in a bush or cloud, like Sezi-Tual's. Her clothing was of a delicate cloth, a strange fashion. It came upon me very slowly what she was, that she had come here from a world unimaginably far. And the wonder of it was that for all her strange skin and eyes and hair and mind, she was human, as I am human: I had no doubt of that. I felt it. For a moment it disturbed me deeply. Then it ceased to trouble me and I felt a great curiosity, almost a yearning, a drawing to her. I wished to know her, to know what she knew.

In me the owner's soul was struggling with the free soul. So it will do all my life.

Keo and Ramayo stopped going to school after they learned to read and write and use the calculator, but I kept on. When there were no more classes to take from the school the Hame kept, the teachers helped

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me find classes in the net. Though the government controlled such courses, there were fine teachers and groups from all over the world, talking about literature and history and the sciences and arts. Always I wanted more history.

Ress, who was a member of the Hame, first took me to the Library of Voe Deo. As it was open only to owners, it was not censored by the government. Freed assets, if they were light-skinned, were kept out by the librarians on one pretext or another. I was dark-skinned, and had learned here in the City to carry myself with an indifferent pride that spared one many insults and offenses. Ress told me to stride in as if I owned the place. I did so, and was given all privileges without question. So I began to read freely, to read any book I wanted in that great library, every book in it if I could. That was my joy, that reading. That was the heart of my freedom.

Beyond my work at the boxmaker's, which was well paid, pleasant, and among pleasant companions, and my learning and reading, there was not much to my life. I did not want more. I was lonely, but I felt that loneliness was no high price to pay for what I wanted.

Ress, whom I had disliked, was a friend to me. I went with her to meetings of the Hame, and also to entertainments that I would have known nothing about without her guidance. "Come on, Bumpkin," she would say. "Got to educate the plantation pup." And she would take me to the makil theater, or to asset dance halls where the music was good. She always wanted to dance. I let her teach me, but was not very happy dancing. One night as we were dancing the "slow-go" her hands began pressing me to her, and looking in her face I saw the mask of sexual desire on it, soft and blank. I broke away. "I don't want to dance," I said.

We walked home. She came up to my room with me, and at my door she tried to hold and kiss me. I was sick with anger. "I don't want that!" I said.

"I'm sorry, Rakam," she said, more gently than I had ever heard her speak. "I know how you must feel. But you've got to get over that, you've got to have your own life. I'm not a man, and I do want you."

I broke in—"A woman used me before a man ever did. Did you ask me if I wanted you? I will never be used again!"

That rage and spite came bursting out of me like poison from an infection. If she had tried to touch me again I would have hurt her. I slammed my door in her face. I went trembling to my desk, sat down, and began to read the book that was open on it.

Next day we were both ashamed and stiff. But Ress had patience under her City quickness and roughness. She did not try to make love to me again, but she got me to trust her and talk to her as I could not talk to anybody else. She listened intently and told me what she thought. She said, "Bumpkin, you have it all wrong. No wonder. How could you have got it right? You think sex is something that gets done to you. It's not. It's something you do. With somebody else. Not to them. You never had any sex. All you ever knew was rape."

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"Lord Erod told me all that a long time ago," I said. I was bitter. "I don't care what it's called. I had enough of it. For the rest of my life. And I'm glad to be without it."

Ress made a face. "At twenty-two?" she said. "Maybe for a while. If you're happy, then fine. But think about what I said. Love is a big part of life to just cut out."

"If I have to have sex I can pleasure myself," I said, not caring if I hurt her. "Love has nothing to do with it."

"That's where you're wrong," she said, but I did not listen. I would learn from teachers and books that I chose for myself, but I would not take advice I had not asked for. I refused to be told what to do or what to think. If I was free, I would be free by myself. I was like a baby when it first stands up.

Ahas had been giving me advice too. He said it was foolish to pursue education so far. "There's nothing useful you can do with so much book-learning," he said. "It's self-indulgent. We need leaders and members with practical skills."

"We need teachers!"

"Yes," he said, "but you knew enough to teach a year ago. What's the good of ancient history, facts about alien worlds? We have a revolution to make!"

I did not stop my reading, but I felt guilty. I took a class at the Hame school teaching illiterate assets and freedpeople to read and write, as I myself had been taught only three years before. It was hard work. Reading is hard for a grown person to learn, tired, at night, after work all day. It is much easier to let the net take one's mind over.

I kept arguing with Ahas in my mind, and one day I said to him, "Is there a Library on Yeowe?"

"I don't know."

"You know there isn't. The Corporations didn't leave any libraries there. They didn't have any. They were ignorant people who knew nothing but profit. Knowledge is a good in itself. I keep on learning so that I can bring my knowledge to Yeowe. If I could I'd bring them the whole Library!"

He stared. "What owners thought, what owners did—that's all their books are about. They don't need that on Yeowe."

"Yes they do," I said, certain he was wrong, though again I could not say why.

At the school they soon called on me to teach history, one of the teachers having left. These classes went well. I worked hard preparing them. Presently I was asked to speak to a study group of advanced students, and that too went well. People were interested in the ideas I drew and the comparisons I had learned to make of our world with other worlds. I had been studying the way various peoples bring up their children, who takes the responsibility for them and how that responsibility is understood, since this seemed to me a place where a people frees or enslaves itself.

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To one of these talks a man from the Embassy of the Ekumen came. I was frightened when I saw the alien face in my audience. I was worse frightened when I recognized him. He had taught the first course in Ekumenical History that I had taken in the net. I had listened to it devotedly though I never participated in the discussion. What I learned had had a great influence on me. I thought he would find me presumptuous for talking of things he truly knew. I stammered on through my lecture, trying not to see his white-cornered eyes.

He came up to me afterward, introduced himself politely, complimented my talk, and asked if I had read such-and-such a book. He engaged me so deftly and kindly in conversation that I had to like and trust him. And he soon earned my trust. I needed his guidance, for much foolishness has been written and spoken, even by wise people, about the balance of power between men and women, on which depend the lives of children and the value of their education. He knew useful books to read, from which I could go on by myself.

His name was Esdardon Aya. He worked in some high position, I was not sure what, at the Embassy. He had been born on Hain, the Old World, humanity's first home, from which all our ancestors came.

Sometimes I thought how strange it was that I knew about such things, such vast and ancient matters, I who had not known anything outside the compound walls till I was six, who had not known the name of the country I lived in till I was eighteen! That was only five years ago, when I was new to the City. Someone had spoken of "Voe Deo," and I had asked, "Where is that?" They had all stared at me. A woman, a hard-voiced old City rentswoman, had said, "Here, Dusty. Right here's Voe Deo. Your country and mine!"

I told Esdardon Aya that. He did not laugh. "A country, a people," he said. "Those are strange and very difficult ideas."

"My country was slavery," I said, and he nodded.

By now I seldom saw Ahas. I missed his kind friendship, but it had all turned to scolding. "You're puffed up, publishing, talking to audiences all the time," he said, "you're putting yourself before our cause."

I said, "But I talk to people in the Hame, I write about things we need to know—everything I do is for freedom."

"The Community is not pleased with that pamphlet of yours," he said, in a serious counseling way, as if telling me a secret I needed to know. "I've been asked to tell you to submit your writings to the committee before you publish again. That press is run by hot-heads. The Hame is causing a good deal of trouble to our candidates."

"Our candidates!" I said in a rage. "No owner is my candidate! Are you still taking orders from the Young Owner?"

That stung him. He said, "If you put yourself first, if you won't cooperate, you bring danger on us all."

"I don't put myself first—politicians and capitalists do that. I put freedom first. Why can't you cooperate with me? It goes two ways, Ahas!"

He left angry, and left me angry.

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I think he missed my dependence on him. Perhaps he was jealous, too, of my independence, for he did remain Lord Erod's man. His was a loyal heart. Our disagreement gave us both much bitter pain. I wish I knew what became of him in the troubled times that followed.

There was truth in his accusation. I had found that I had the gift in speaking and writing of moving people's minds and hearts. Nobody told me that such a gift is as dangerous as it is strong. Ahas said I was putting myself first, but I knew I was not doing that. I was wholly in the service of the truth and of liberty. No one told me that the end cannot purify the means, since only the Lord Kamye knows what the end may be. My grandmother could have told me that. The *Arkamye* would have reminded me of it, but I did not often read in it, and in the City there were no old men singing the word, evenings. If there had been I would not have heard them over the sound of my beautiful voice speaking the beautiful truth.

I believe I did no harm, except as we all did, in bringing it to the attention of the rulers of Voe Deo that the Hame was growing bolder and the Radical Party was growing stronger, and that they must move against us.

The first sign was a divisive one. In the open compounds, as well as the men's side and the women's side there were several apartments for couples. This was a radical thing. Any kind of marriage between assets was illegal. They were not allowed to live in pairs. Assets' only legitimate loyalty was to their owner. The child did not belong to the mother, but to the owner. But since gareots were living in the same place as owned assets, these apartments for couples had been tolerated or ignored. Now suddenly the law was invoked, asset couples were arrested, fined if they were wage-earners, separated, and sent to company-run compound houses. Ress and the other elderwomen who ran our house were fined and warned that if "immoral arrangements" were discovered again, they would be held responsible and sent to the labor camps. Two little children of one of the couples were not on the government's list and so were left, abandoned, when their parents were taken off. Keo and Ramayo took them in. They became wards of the women's side, as orphans in the compounds always did.

There were fierce debates about this in meetings of the Hame and The Community. Some said the right of assets to live together and to bring up their children was a cause the Radical Party should support. It was not directly threatening to ownership, and might appeal to the natural instincts of many owners, especially the women, who could not vote but who were valuable allies. Others said that private affections must be overridden by loyalty to the cause of liberty, and that any personal issue must take second place to the great issue of emancipation. Lord Erod spoke thus at a meeting. I rose to answer him. I said that there was no freedom without sexual freedom, and that until women were allowed and men willing to take responsibility for their children, no woman, whether owner or asset, would be free.

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"Men must bear the responsibility for the public side of life, the greater world the child will enter; women, for the domestic side of life, the moral and physical upbringing of the child. This is a division enjoined by God and Nature," Erod answered.

"Then will emancipation for a woman mean she's free to enter the beza, be locked in on the women's side?"

"Of course not," he began, but I broke in again, fearing his golden tongue—"Then what is freedom for a woman? Is it different from freedom for a man? Or is a free person free?"

The moderator was angrily thumping his staff, but some other asset women took up my question. "When will the Radical Party speak for us?" they said, and one elderwoman cried, "Where are your women, you owners who want to abolish slavery? Why aren't they here? Don't you let them out of the beza?"

The moderator pounded and finally got order restored. I was half triumphant and half dismayed. I saw Erod and also some of the people from the Hame now looking at me as an open troublemaker. And indeed my words had divided us. But were we not already divided?

A group of us women went home talking through the streets, talking aloud. These were my streets now, with their traffic and lights and dangers and life. I was a City woman, a free woman. That night I was an owner. I owned the City. I owned the future.

The arguments went on. I was asked to speak at many places. As I was leaving one such meeting, the Hainishman Esdardon Aya came to me and said in a casual way, as if discussing my speech, "Rakam, you're in danger of arrest."

I did not understand. He walked along beside me away from the others and went on: "A rumor has come to my attention at the Embassy.... The government of Voe Deo is about to change the status of manumitted assets. You're no longer to be considered gareots. You must have an owner-sponsor."

This was bad news, but after thinking it over I said, "I think I can find an owner to sponsor me. Lord Boeba, maybe."

"The owner-sponsor will have to be approved by the government.... This will tend to weaken The Community both through the asset and the owner members. It's very clever, in its way," said Esdardon Aya.

"What happens to us if we don't find an approved sponsor?"

"You'll be considered runaways."

That meant death, the labor camps, or auction.

"O Lord Kamye," I said, and took Esdardon Aya's arm, because a curtain of dark had fallen across my eyes.

We had walked some way along the street. When I could see again I saw the street, the high houses of the City, the shining lights I had thought were mine.

"I have some friends," said the Hainishman, walking on with me, "who are planning a trip to the Kingdom of Bambur."

After a while I said, "What would I do there?"

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"A ship to Yeowe leaves from there."

"To Yeowe," I said.

"So I hear," he said, as if he were talking about a streetcar line. "In a few years, I expect Voe Deo will begin offering rides to Yeowe. Exporting intractables, troublemakers, members of the Hame. But that will involve recognizing Yeowe as a nation state, which they haven't brought themselves to do yet. They are, however, permitting some semi-legitimate trade arrangements by their client states. . . . A couple of years ago, the King of Bambur bought one of the old Corporation ships, a genuine old Colony Trader. The king thought he'd like to visit the moons of Werel. But he found the moons boring. So he rented the ship to a consortium of scholars from the University of Bambur and businessmen from his capital. Some manufacturers in Bambur carry on a little trade with Yeowe in it, and some scientists at the university make scientific expeditions in it at the same time. Of course each trip is very expensive, so they carry as many scientists as they can whenever they go."

I heard all this not hearing it, yet understanding it.

"So far," he said, "they've gotten away with it."

He always sounded quiet, a little amused, yet not superior.

"Does The Community know about this ship?" I asked.

"Some members do, I believe. And people in the Hame. But it's very dangerous to know about. If Voe Deo were to find out that a client state was exporting valuable property. . . . In fact, we believe they may have some suspicions. So this is a decision that can't be made lightly. It is both dangerous and irrevocable. Because of that danger, I hesitated to speak of it to you. I hesitated so long that you must make it very quickly. In fact, tonight, Rakam."

I looked from the lights of the City up to the sky they hid. "I'll go," I said. I thought of Walsu.

"Good," he said. At the next corner he changed the direction we had been walking, away from my house, toward the Embassy of the Ekumen.

I never wondered why he did this for me. He was a secret man, a man of secret power, but he always spoke truth, and I think he followed his own heart when he could.

As we entered the Embassy grounds, a great park softly illuminated in the winter night by groundlights, I stopped. "My books," I said. He looked his question. "I wanted to take my books to Yeowe," I said. Now my voice shook with a rush of tears, as if everything I was leaving came down to that one thing. "They need books on Yeowe, I think," I said.

After a moment he said, "I'll have them sent on our next ship. I wish I could put you on that ship," he added in a lower voice. "But of course the Ekumen can't give free rides to runaway slaves. . . ."

I turned and took his hand and laid my forehead against it for a moment, the only time in my life I ever did that of my own free will.

He was startled. "Come, come," he said, and hurried me along.

The Embassy hired Werelian guards, mostly veots, men of the old warrior caste. One of them, a grave, courteous, very silent man, went

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with me on the flyer to Bambur, the island kingdom east of the Great Continent. He had all the papers I needed. From the flyer port he took me to the Royal Space Observatory, which the king had built for his space ship. There without delay I was taken to the ship, which stood in its great scaffolding ready to depart.

I imagine that they had made comfortable apartments up front for the king when he went to see the moons. The body of the ship, which had belonged to the Agricultural Plantation Corporation, still consisted of great compartments for the produce of the Colony. It would be bringing back grain from Yeowe in four of the cargo bays, that now held farm machinery made in Bambur. The fifth compartment held assets.

The cargo bay had no seats. They had laid felt pads on the floor, and we lay down and were strapped to stanchions, as cargo would have been. There were about fifty "scientists." I was the last to come aboard and be strapped in. The crew were hasty and nervous and spoke only the language of Bambur. I could not understand the instructions we were given. I needed very badly to relieve my bladder, but they had shouted "No time, no time!" So I lay in torment while they closed the great doors of the bay, which made me think of the doors of Shomeke compound. Around me people called out to one another in their language. A baby screamed. I knew that language. Then the great noise began, beneath us. Slowly I felt my body pressed down on the floor, as if a huge soft foot was stepping on me, till my shoulderblades felt as if they were cutting into the mat, and my tongue pressed back into my throat as if to choke me, and with a sharp stab of pain and hot relief my bladder released its urine.

Then we began to be weightless—to float in our bonds. Up was down and down was up, either was both or neither. I heard people all around me calling out again, saying one another's names, saying what must be, "Are you all right? Yes, I'm all right." The baby had never ceased its fierce, piercing yells. I began to feel at my restraints, for I saw the woman next to me sitting up and rubbing her arms and chest where the straps had held her. But a great blurry voice came bellowing over the loudspeaker, giving orders in the language of Bambur and then in Voe Dean: "Do not unfasten the straps! Do not attempt to move about! The ship is under attack! The situation is extremely dangerous!"

So I lay floating in my little mist of urine, listening to the strangers around me talk, understanding nothing. I was utterly miserable, and yet fearless as I had never been. I was carefree. It was like dying. It would be foolish to worry about anything while one died.

The ship moved strangely, shuddering, seeming to turn. Several people were sick. The air filled with the smell and tiny droplets of vomit. I freed my hands enough to draw the scarf I was wearing up over my face as a filter, tucking the ends under my head to hold it.

Inside the scarf I could no longer see the huge vault of the cargo bay stretching above or below me, making me feel I was about to fly or fall into it. It smelled of myself, which was comforting. It was the scarf I

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often wore when I dressed up to give a talk, fine gauze, pale red with a silver thread woven in at intervals. When I bought it at a City market, paying my own earned money for it, I had thought of my mother's red scarf, given her by Lady Tazeu. I thought she would have liked this one, though it was not as bright. Now I lay and looked into the pale red dimness it made of the vault, starred with the lights at the hatches, and thought of my mother, Yowa. She had probably been killed that morning in the compound. Perhaps she had been carried to another estate as a use-woman, but Ahas had never found any trace of her. I thought of the way she had of carrying her head a little to the side, deferent yet alert, gracious. Her eyes had been full and bright, "eyes that hold the seven moons," as the song says. I thought then: But I will never see the moons again.

At that I felt so strange that to comfort myself and distract my mind I began to sing under my breath, there alone in my tent of red gauze warm with my own breath. I sang the freedom songs we sang in the Hame, and then I sang the love songs Lady Tazeu had taught me. Finally I sang "O, O, Yeowe," softly at first, then a little louder. I heard a voice somewhere out in that soft red mist world join in with me, a man's voice, then a woman's. Assets from Voe Deo all know that song. We sang it together. A Bambur man's voice picked it up and put words in his own language to it, and others joined in singing it. Then the singing died away. The baby's crying was weak now. The air was very foul.

We learned many hours later, when at last clear air entered the vents and we were told we could release our bonds, that a ship of the Voe Dean Space Defense Fleet had intercepted the freighter's course just above the atmosphere and ordered it to stop. The captain chose to ignore the signal. The warship had fired, and though nothing hit the freighter the blast had damaged the controls. The freighter had gone on, and had seen and heard nothing more of the warship. We were now about eleven days from Yeowe. The warship, or a group of them, might be in wait for us near Yeowe. The reason they gave for ordering the freighter to halt was "suspected contraband merchandise."

That fleet of warships had been built centuries ago to protect Werel from the attacks they expected from the Alien Empire, which is what they then called the Ekumen. They were so frightened by that imagined threat that they put all their energy into the technology of space flight; and the colonization of Yeowe was a result. After four hundred years without any threat of attack, Voe Deo had finally let the Ekumen send envoys and ambassadors. They had used the Defense Fleet to transport troops and weapons during the War of Liberation. Now they were using them the way estate owners used hunting dogs and hunting cats, to hunt down runaway slaves.

I found the two other Voe Deans in the cargo bay, and we moved our "bedstraps" together so we could talk. Both of them had been brought to Bambur by the Hame, who had paid their fare. It had not occurred to me that there was a fare to be paid. I knew who had paid mine.

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"Can't fly a space ship on love," the woman said. She was a strange person. She really was a scientist. Highly trained in chemistry by the company that rented her, she had persuaded the Hame to send her to Yeowe because she was sure her skills would be needed and in demand. She had been making higher wages than many gareots did, but she expected to do still better on Yeowe. "I'm going to be rich," she said.

The man, only a boy, a mill hand in a Northern city, had simply run away and had the luck to meet people who could save him from death or the labor camps. He was sixteen, ignorant, noisy, rebellious, sweet-natured. He became a general favorite, like a puppy. I was in demand because I knew the history of Yeowe and through a man who knew both our languages I could tell the Bamburs something about where they were going—the centuries of Corporation slavery, Nadami, the War, the Liberation. Some of them were rentspeople from the cities, others were a group of estate slaves bought at auction by the Hame with false money and under a false name, and hurried onto this flight. None of them knew where they were going. It was that trick that had drawn Voe Deo's attention to this flight.

Yoke, the mill boy, speculated endlessly about how the Yeowans would welcome us. He had a story, half a joke half a dream, about the bands playing and the speeches and the big dinner they would have for us. The dinner grew more and more elaborate as the days went on. They were long, hungry days, floating in the featureless great space of the cargo bay, marked only by the alternation every twelve hours of brighter and dimmer lighting and the issuing of two meals during the "day," food and water in tubes you squeezed into your mouth. I did not think much about what might happen. I was between happenings. If the warships found us we would probably die. If we got to Yeowe it would be a new life. Now we were floating.

4. Yeowe

The ship came down safe at the Port of Yeowe. They unloaded the crates of machinery first, then the other cargo. We came out staggering and holding on to one another, not able to stand up to the great pull of this new world drawing us down to its center, blinded by the light of the sun that we were closer to than we had ever been.

"Over here! Over here!" a man shouted. I was grateful to hear my language, but the Bamburs looked apprehensive.

Over here—in here—strip—wait—All we heard when we were first on the Free World was orders. We had to be decontaminated, which was painful and exhausting. We had to be examined by doctors. Anything we had brought with us had to be decontaminated and examined and listed. That did not take long for me. I had brought the clothes I wore and had worn for two weeks now. I was glad to get decontaminated. Finally we were told to stand in line in one of the big empty cargo sheds. The sign

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over the doors still read APCY—Agricultural Plantation Corporation of Yeowe. One by one we were processed for entry. The man who processed me was short, white, middle-aged, with spectacles, like any clerk asset in the City, but I looked at him with reverence. He was the first Yeowan I had spoken to. He asked me questions from a form and wrote down my answers. "Can you read?"—"Yes."—"Skills?"—I stammered a moment and said, "Teaching—I can teach reading and history." He never looked up at me.

I was glad to be patient. After all, the Yeowans had not asked us to come. We were admitted only because they knew if they sent us back we would die horribly in a public execution. We were a profitable cargo to Bambur, but to Yeowe we were a problem. But many of us had skills they must need, and I was glad they asked us about them.

When we had all been processed, we were separated into two groups: men and women. Yoke hugged me and went off to the men's side laughing and waving. I stood with the women. We watched all the men led off to the shuttle that went to the Old Capital. Now my patience failed and my hope darkened. I prayed, "Lord Kamye, not here, not here too!" Fear made me angry. When a man came giving us orders again, come on, this way, I went up to him and said, "Who are you? Where are we going? We are free women!"

He was a big fellow with a round, white face and bluish eyes. He looked down at me, huffy at first, then smiling. "Yes, Little Sister, you're free," he said. "But we've all got to work, don't we? You ladies are going south. They need people on the rice plantations. You do a little work, make a little money, look around a little, all right? If you don't like it down there, come on back. We can always use more pretty little ladies round here."

I had never heard the Yeowan country accent, a singing, blurry softening, with long, clear vowels. I had never heard asset women called ladies. No one had ever called me Little Sister. He did not mean the word "use" as I took it, surely. He meant well. I was bewildered and said no more. But the chemist, Tualtak, said, "Listen, I'm no field hand, I'm a trained scientist—"

"Oh, you're all scientists," the Yeowan said with his big smile. "Come on now, ladies!" He strode ahead, and we followed. Tualtak kept talking. He smiled and paid no heed.

We were taken to a train car waiting on a siding. The huge, bright sun was setting. All the sky was orange and pink, full of light. Long shadows ran black along the ground. The warm air was dusty and sweet-smelling. While we stood waiting to climb up into the car I stooped and picked up a little reddish stone from the ground. It was round, with a tiny stripe of white clear through it. It was a piece of Yeowe. I held Yeowe in my hand. That little stone, too, I still have.

Our car was shunted along to the main yards and hooked onto a train. When the train started we were served dinner, soup from great kettles wheeled through the car, bowls of sweet, heavy marsh rice, pini fruit—a luxury on Werel, here a commonplace. We ate and ate. I watched the

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last light die away from the long, rolling hills that the train was passing through. The stars came out. No moons. Never again. But I saw Werel rising in the east. It was a great blue-green star, looking as Yeowe looks from Werel. But you would never see Yeowe rising after sunset. Yeowe followed the sun.

I'm alive and I'm here, I thought. I'm following the sun. I let the rest go, and fell asleep to the swaying of the train.

We were taken off the train on the second day at a town on the great river Yot. Our group of twenty-three were separated there, and ten of us were taken by ox cart to a village, Hagayot. It had been an APCY compound, growing marsh rice to feed the Colony slaves. Now it was a cooperative village, growing marsh rice to feed the Free People. We were enrolled as members of the cooperative. We lived share and share alike with the villagers until pay-out, when we could pay them back what we owed the cooperative.

It was a reasonable way to handle immigrants without money, who did not know the language, or who had no skills. But I did not understand why they had ignored our skills. Why had they sent the men from Bambur plantations, field hands, into the city, not here? Why only women?

I did not understand why, in a village of free people, there was a men's side and a women's side, with a ditch between them.

I did not understand why, as I soon discovered, the men made all the decisions and gave all the orders. But, it being so, I did understand that they were afraid of us Werelian women, who were not used to taking orders from our equals. And I understood that I must take orders and not even look as if I thought of questioning them. The men of Hagayot Village watched us with fierce suspicion and a whip as ready as any Boss's. "Maybe you told men what to do back over there," the foreman told us the first morning in the fields. "Well, that's back over there. That's not here. Here we free people work together. You think you're Bosswomen. There aren't any Bosswomen here."

There were grandmothers on the women's side, but they were not the powers our grandmothers had been. Here, where for the first century there had been no slave women at all, the men had had to make their own life, set up their own powers. When women slaves at last were sent into those little slave-kingdoms of men, there was no power for them at all. They had no voice. Not till they got away to the cities did they ever have a voice on Yeowe.

I learned silence.

But it was not as bad for me and Tualtak as for our eight Bambur companions. We were the first immigrants any of these villagers had ever seen. They knew only one language. They thought the Bambur women were witches because they did not talk "like human beings." They whipped them for talking to each other in their own language.

I will confess that in my first year on the Free World my heart was as low as it had been at Zeskra. I hated standing all day in the shallow

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water of the rice paddies. Our feet were always sodden and swollen and full of tiny burrowing worms we had to pick out every night. But it was needed work and not too hard for a healthy woman. It was not the work that bore me down.

Hagayot was not a tribal village, not as conservative as some of the old villages I learned about later. Girls here were not ritually raped, and a woman was safe on the women's side. She "jumped the ditch" only with a man she chose. But if a woman went anywhere alone, or even got separated from the other women working in the paddies, she was supposed to be "asking for it," and any man thought it his right to force himself on her.

I made good friends among the village women and the Bamburs. They were no more ignorant than I had been a few years before, and some were wiser than I would ever be. There was no possibility of having a friend among men who thought themselves our owners. I could not see how life here would ever change. My heart was very low, nights, when I lay among the sleeping women and children in our hut and thought, Is this what Walsu died for?

In my second year there, I resolved to do what I could to keep above the misery that threatened me. One of the Bambur women, meek and slow of understanding, whipped and beaten by both women and men for speaking her language, had drowned in one of the great rice paddies. She had lain down there in the warm shallow water not much deeper than her ankles, and had drowned. I feared that yielding, that water of despair. I made up my mind to use my skill, to teach the village women and children to read.

I wrote out some little primers on rice cloth and made a game of it for the little children, first. Some of the older girls and women were curious. Some of them knew that people in the towns and cities could read. They saw it as a mystery, a witchcraft that gave the city people their great power. I did not deny this.

For the women, I first wrote down verses and passages of the *Arkamye,* all I could remember, so that they could have it and not have to wait for one of the men who called themselves "priests" to recite it. They were proud of learning to read these verses. Then I had my friend Seugi tell me a story, her own recollection of meeting a wild hunting cat in the marshes as a child. I wrote it down, entitling it "The Marsh Lion, by Aro Seugi," and read it aloud to the author and a circle of girls and women. They marveled and laughed. Seugi wept, touching the writing that held her voice.

The chief of the village and his headmen and foremen and honorary sons, all the hierarchy and government of the village, were suspicious and not pleased by my teaching, yet did not want to forbid me. The government of Yotebber Region had sent word that they were establishing country schools, where village children were to be sent for half the year. The village men knew that their sons would be advantaged if they could already read and write when they went there.

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The Chosen Son, a big, mild, pale man, blind in one eye from a war wound, came to me at last. He wore his coat of office, a tight, long coat such as Werelian owners had worn three hundred years ago. He told me that I should not teach girls to read, only boys.

I told him I would teach all the children who wanted to learn, or none of them.

"Girls do not want to learn this," he said.

"They do. Fourteen girls have asked to be in my class. Eight boys. Do you say girls do not need religious training, Chosen Son?"

This gave him pause. "They should learn the life of the Merciful Lady," he said.

"I will write the Life of Tual for them," I said at once. He walked away, saving his dignity.

I had little pleasure in my victory, such as it was. At least I went on teaching.

Tualtak was always at me to run away, run away to the city downriver. She had grown very thin, for she could not digest the heavy food. She hated the work and the people. "It's all right for you, you were a plantation pup, a dusty, but I never was, my mother was a rentswoman, we lived in fine rooms on Haba Street, I was the brightest trainee they ever had in the laboratory," and on and on, over and over, living in the world she had lost.

Sometimes I listened to her talk about running away. I tried to remember the maps of Yeowe in my lost books. I remembered the great river, the Yot, running from far inland three thousand kilos to the South Sea. But where were we on its vast length, how far from Yotebber City on its delta? Between Hagayot and the city might be a hundred villages like this one. "Have you been raped?" I asked Tualtak.

She took offense. "I'm a rentswoman, not a use-woman," she snapped.

I said, "I was a use-woman for two years. If I was raped again I would kill the man or kill myself. I think two Werelian women walking alone here would be raped. I can't do it, Tualtak."

"It can't all be like this place!" she cried, so desperate that I felt my own throat close up with tears.

"Maybe when they open the schools—there will be people from the cities then—" It was all I had to offer her, or myself, as hope. "Maybe if the harvest's good this year, if we can get our money, we can get on the train. . . ."

That indeed was our best hope. The problem was to get our money from the chief and his cohorts. They kept the cooperative's income in a stone hut that they called the Bank of Hagayot, and only they ever saw the money. Each individual had an account, and they kept tally faithfully, the old Banker Headman scratching your account out in the dirt if you asked for it. But women and children could not withdraw money from their account. All we could get was a kind of scrip, clay pieces marked by the Banker Headman, good to buy things from one another, things people in the village made, clothes, sandals, tools, bead necklaces,

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rice beer. Our real money was safe, we were told, in the bank. I thought of that old lame bondsman at Shomeke, jigging and singing, "Money in the bank, Lord! Money in the bank!"

Before we ever came, the women had resented this system. Now there were nine more women resenting it.

One night I asked my friend Seugi, whose hair was as white as her skin, "Seugi, do you know what happened at a place called Nadami?"

"Yes," she said. "The women opened the door. All the women rose up and then the men rose up against the Bosses. But they needed weapons. And a woman ran in the night and stole the key from the owner's box and opened the door of the strong place where the Bosses kept their guns and bullets, and she held it open with the strength of her body, so that the slaves could arm themselves. And they killed the Corporations and made that place, Nadami, free."

"Even on Werel they tell that story," I said. "Even there women tell about Nadami, where the women began the Liberation. Men tell it too. Do men here tell it? Do they know it?"

Seugi and the other women nodded.

"If a woman freed the men of Nadami," I said, "maybe the women of Hagayot can free their money."

Seugi laughed. She called out to a group of grandmothers, "Listen to Rakam! Listen to this!"

After plenty of talk for days and weeks, it ended in a delegation of women, thirty of us. We crossed the ditch bridge onto the men's side and ceremoniously asked to see the chief. Our principal bargaining counter was shame. Seugi and other village women did the speaking, for they knew how far they could shame the men without goading them into anger and retaliation. Listening to them, I heard dignity speak to dignity, pride speak to pride. For the first time since I came to Yeowe I felt I was one of these people, that this pride and dignity were mine.

Nothing happens fast in a village. But by the next harvest, the women of Hagayot could draw their own earned share out of the bank in cash.

"Now for the vote," I said to Seugi, for there was no secret ballot in the village. When there was a regional election, even in the worldwide Ratification of the Constitution, the chiefs polled the men and filled out the ballots. They did not even poll the women. They wrote in the votes they wanted cast.

But I did not stay to help bring about that change at Hagayot. Tualtak was really ill, and half crazy with her longing to get out of the marshes, to the city. And I too longed for that. So we took our wages, and Seugi and other women drove us in an ox cart on the causeway across the marshes to the freight station. There we raised the flag that signaled the next train to stop for passengers.

It came along in a few hours, a long train of boxcars loaded with marsh rice, heading for the mills of Yotebber City. We rode in the crew car with the train crew and a few other passengers, village men. I had a big knife in my belt, but none of the men showed us any disrespect. Away from

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their compounds they were timid and shy. I sat up in my bunk in that car watching the great, wild, plumy marshes whirl by, and the villages on the banks of the wide river, and wished the train would go on forever.

But Tualtak lay in the bunk below me, coughing and fretful. When we got to Yotebber City she was so weak I knew I had to get her to a doctor. A man from the train crew was kind, telling us how to get to the hospital on the public cars. As we rattled through the hot, crowded city streets in the crowded car, I was still happy. I could not help it.

At the hospital they demanded our citizens' registration papers.

I had never heard of such papers. Later I found that ours had been given to the chiefs at Hagayot, who had kept them, as they kept all "their" women's papers. At the time, all I could do was stare and say, "I don't know anything about registration papers."

I heard one of the women at the desk say to the other, "Lord, how dusty can you get?"

I knew what we looked like. I knew we looked dirty and low. I knew I seemed ignorant and stupid. But when I heard that word "dusty" my pride and dignity woke up again. I put my hand into my pack and brought out my freedom paper, that old paper with Erod's writing on it, all crumpled and folded, all dusty.

"This is my Citizen's Registration paper," I said in a loud voice, making those women jump and turn. "My mother's blood and my grandmother's blood is on it. My friend here is sick. She needs a doctor. Now bring us to a doctor!"

A thin little woman came forward from the corridor. "Come on this way," she said. One of the deskwomen started to protest. This little woman give her a look.

We followed her to an examination room.

"I'm Dr. Yeron," she said, then corrected herself. "I'm serving as a nurse," she said. "But I am a doctor. And you—you come from the Old World? from Werel? Sit down there, now, child, take off your shirt. How long have you been here?"

Within a quarter of an hour she had diagnosed Tualtak and got her a bed in a ward for rest and observation, found out our histories, and sent me off with a note to a friend of hers who would help me find a place to live and a job.

"Teaching!" Dr. Yeron said. "A teacher! Oh, woman, you are rain to the dry land!"

Indeed the first school I talked to wanted to hire me at once, to teach anything I wanted. Because I come of a capitalist people, I went to other schools to see if I could make more money at them. But I came back to the first one. I liked the people there.

Before the War of Liberation, the cities of Yeowe, which were cities of Corporation-owned assets who rented their own freedom, had had their own schools and hospitals and many kinds of training programs. There was even a University for assets in the Old Capital. The Corporations,

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of course, had controlled all the information that came to such institutions, and watched and censored all teaching and writing, keeping everything aimed toward the maximization of their profits. But within that narrow frame the assets had been free to use the information they had as they pleased, and city Yeowans had valued education deeply. During the long war, thirty years, all that system of gathering and teaching knowledge had broken down. A whole generation grew up learning nothing but fighting and hiding, famine and disease. The head of my school said to me, "Our children grew up illiterate, ignorant. Is it any wonder the plantation chiefs just took over where the Corporation Bosses left off? Who was to stop them?"

These men and women believed with a fierce passion that only education would lead to freedom. They were still fighting the War of Liberation.

Yotebber City was a big, poor, sunny, sprawling city with wide streets, low buildings, and huge old shady trees. The traffic was mostly afoot, with cycles tinging and public cars clanging along among the slow crowds. There were miles of shacks and shanties down in the old floodplain of the river behind the levees, where the soil was rich for gardening. The center of the city was on a low rise, the mills and train yards spreading out from it. Downtown it looked like the City of Voe Deo, only older and poorer and gentler. Instead of big stores for owners, people bought and sold everything from stalls in open markets. The air was soft, here in the south, a warm, soft sea air full of mist and sunlight. I stayed happy. I have by the grace of the Lord a mind that can leave misfortune behind, and I was happy in Yotebber City.

Tualtak recovered her health and found a good job as a chemist in a factory. I saw her seldom, as our friendship had been a matter of necessity, not choice. Whenever I saw her she talked about Haba Street and the laboratory on Werel, and complained about her work and the people here.

Dr. Yeron did not forget me. She wrote a note and told me to come visit her, which I did. Presently, when I was settled, she asked me to come with her to a meeting of an educational society. This, I found, was a group of democrats, mostly teachers, who sought to work against the autocratic power of the tribal and regional Chiefs under the new Constitution, and to counteract what they called the slave mind, the rigid, misogynistic hierarchy that I had encountered in Hagayot. My experience was useful to them, for they were all city people who had met the slave mind only when they found themselves governed by it. The women of the group were the angriest. They had lost the most at Liberation, and now had less to lose. In general the men were gradualists, the women ready for revolution. As a Werelian, ignorant of politics on Yeowe, I listened and did not talk. It was hard for me not to talk. I am a talker, and sometimes I had plenty to say. But I held my tongue and heard them. They were people worth hearing.

Ignorance defends itself savagely, and illiteracy, as I well knew, can

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be shrewd. Though the Chief, the President of Yo'ebber Region, elected by a manipulated ballot, might not understand our counter-manipulations of the school curriculum, he did not waste much energy trying to control the schools. He sent his Inspectors to meddle with our classes and censor our books. But what he saw as important was the fact that, just as the Corporations had, he controlled the net. The news, the information programs, the puppets of the neareals, all danced to his strings. Against that, what harm could a lot of teachers do? Parents who had no schooling had children who entered the net to hear and see and feel what the Chief wanted them to know: that freedom is obedience to leaders, that virtue is violence, that manhood is domination. Against the enactment of such truths in daily life and in the heightened sensational experience of the neareals, what good were words?

"Literacy is irrelevant," one of our group said sorrowfully. "The Chiefs have jumped right over our heads into the postliterate information technology."

I brooded over that, hating her fancy words, irrelevant, postliterate, because I was afraid she was right.

To the next meeting of our group, to my surprise, an Alien came: the Sub-Envoy of the Ekumen. He was supposed to be a great feather in our Chief's cap, sent down from the Old Capital apparently to support the Chief's stand against the World Party, which was still strong down here and still clamoring that Yeowe should keep out all foreigners. I had heard vaguely that such a person was here, but I had not expected to meet him at a gathering of subversive school teachers.

He was a short man, red-brown, with white corners to his eyes, but handsome if one could ignore that. He sat in the seat in front of me. He sat perfectly still, as if accustomed to sitting still, and listened without speaking as if accustomed to listening. At the end of the meeting he turned around and his queer eyes looked straight at me.

"Radosse Rakam?" he said.

I nodded, dumb.

"I'm Yehedarhed Havzhiva," he said, "I have some books for you from old music."

I stared. I said, "Books?"

"From old music," he said again. "Esdardon Aya, on Werel."

"My books?" I said.

He smiled. He had a broad, quick smile.

"Oh, where?" I cried.

"They're at my house. We can get them tonight, if you like. I have a car." There was something ironic and light in how he said that, as if he was a man who did not expect to have a car, though he might enjoy it.

Dr. Yeron came over. "So you found her," she said to the Sub-Envoy. He looked at her with such a bright face that I thought, these two are lovers. Though she was much older than he there was nothing unlikely in the thought. Dr. Yeron was a magnetic woman. It was odd to me to

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think it, though, for my mind was not given to speculating about people's sexual affairs. That was no interest of mine.

He put his hand on her arm as they talked, and I saw with peculiar intensity how gentle his touch was, almost hesitant, yet trustful. That is love, I thought. Yet they parted, I saw, without that look of private understanding that lovers often give each other.

He and I rode in his government electric car, his two silent bodyguards, policewomen, sitting in the front seat. We spoke of Esdardon Aya, whose name, he explained to me, meant Old Music. I told him how Esdardon Aya had saved my life by sending me here. He listened in a way that made it easy to talk to him. I said, "I was sick to leave my books, and I've thought about them, missing them, as if they were my family. But I think maybe I'm a fool to feel that way."

"Why a fool?" he asked. He had a foreign accent, but he had the Yeowan lilt already, and his voice was beautiful, low and warm.

I tried to explain everything at once: "Well, they mean so much to me because I was illiterate when I came to the City, and it was the books that gave me freedom, gave me the world—the worlds—But now, here, I see how the net, the holos, the neareals mean so much more to people, giving them the present time. Maybe it's just clinging to the past to cling to books. Yeowans have to go toward the future. And we'll never change people's minds just with words."

He listened intently, as he had done at the meeting, and then answered slowly, "But words are an essential way of thinking. And books keep the words true. . . . I didn't read till I was an adult, either."

"You didn't?"

"I knew how, but I didn't. I lived in a village. It's cities that have to have books," he said, quite decisively, as if he had thought about this matter. "If they don't, we keep on starting over every generation. It's a waste. You have to save the words."

When we got to his house, up at the top end of the old part of town, there were four crates of books in the entrance hall.

"These aren't all mine!" I said.

"Old Music said they were yours," Mr. Yehedarhed said, with his quick smile and quick glance at me. You can tell where an Alien is looking much better than you can tell with us. With us, except for a few people with bluish eyes, you have to be close enough to see the dark pupil move in the dark eye.

"I haven't got anywhere to put so many," I said, amazed, realizing how that strange man, Old Music, had helped me to freedom yet again.

"At your school, maybe? The school library?"

It was a good idea, but I thought at once of the Chief's inspectors pawing through them, perhaps confiscating them. When I spoke of that, the Sub-Envoy said, "What if I present them as gift from the Embassy? I think that might embarrass the inspectors."

"Oh," I said, and burst out, "Why are you so kind? You, and he—Are you Hainish too?"

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"Yes," he said, not answering my other question. "I was. I hope to be Yeowan."

He asked me to sit down and drink a little glass of wine with him before his guard drove me home. He was easy and friendly, but a quiet man. I saw he had been hurt. There were newly healed scars on his face, and his hair was half grown out where he had had a head injury. He asked me what my books were, and I said, "History."

At that he smiled, slowly this time. He said nothing, but he raised his glass to me. I raised mine, imitating him, and we drank.

Next day he had the books delivered to our school. When we opened and shelved them, we realized we had a great treasure. "There's nothing like this at the University," said one of the teachers, who had studied there for a year.

There were histories and anthropologies of Werel and of the worlds of the Ekumen, works of philosophy and politics by Werelians and by people of other worlds, there were compendiums of literature, poetry, and stories, encyclopedias, books of science, atlases, dictionaries. In a corner of one of the crates were my own few books, my own treasure, even that first little crude "History of Yeowe, Printed at Yeowe University in the Year One of Liberty." Most of my books I left in the library, but I took that one and a few others home for love, for comfort.

I had found another love and comfort not long since. A child at school had brought me a present, a spotted-cat kitten, just weaned. The boy gave it to me with such loving pride that I could not refuse it. When I tried to pass it on to another teacher they all laughed at me. "You're elected, Rakam!" they said. So unwillingly I took the little being home, afraid of its frailty and delicacy and near to feeling a disgust for it. Women in the beza at Zeskra had had pets, spotted cats and foxdogs, spoiled little animals fed better than we were. I had been called by the name of a pet animal once.

I alarmed the kitten taking it out of its basket, and it bit my thumb to the bone. It was tiny and frail but it had teeth. I began to have some respect for it.

That night I put it to sleep in its basket, but it climbed up on my bed and sat on my face until I let it under the covers. There it slept perfectly still all night. In the morning it woke me by dancing on me, chasing dustmotes in a sunbeam. It made me laugh, waking, which is a pleasant thing. I felt that I had never laughed very much, and wanted to.

The kitten was all black, its spots showing only in certain lights, black on black. I called it Owner. I found it pleasant to come home evenings to be greeted by my little Owner.

Now for the next half year we were planning the great demonstration of women. There were many meetings, at some of which I met the Sub-Envoy again, so that I began to look for him. I liked to watch him listen to our arguments. There were those who argued that the demonstration must not be limited to the wrongs and rights of women, for equality must be for all. Others argued that it should not depend in any way on the

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support of foreigners, but should be a purely Yeowan movement. Mr. Yehedarhed listened to them, but I got angry. "I'm a foreigner," I said. "Does that make me no use to you? That's owner talk—as if you were better than other people!" And Dr. Yeron said, "I will believe equality is for all when I see it written in the Constitution of Yeowe." For our Constitution, ratified by a world vote during the time I was at Hagayot, spoke of citizens only as men. That is finally what the demonstration became, a demand that the Constitution be amended to include women as citizens, provide for the secret ballot, and guarantee the right to free speech, freedom of the press and of assembly, and free education for all children.

I lay down on the train tracks along with seventy thousand women, that hot day. I sang with them. I heard what that sounds like, so many women singing together, what a big, deep sound it makes.

I had begun to speak in public again when we were gathering women for the great demonstration. It was a gift I had, and we made use of it. Sometimes gang boys or ignorant men would come to heckle and threaten me, shouting, "Bosswoman, Ownerwoman, black cunt, go back where you came from!" Once when they were yelling that, go back, go back, I leaned into the microphone and said, "I can't go back. We used to sing a song on the plantation where I was a slave," and I sang it,

O, O, Ye-o-we,
Nobody never comes back.

The singing made them be still for a moment. They heard it, that awful grief, that yearning.

After the great demonstration the unrest never died down, but there were times that the energy flagged, the Movement didn't move, as Dr. Yeron said. During one of those times I went to her and proposed that we set up a printing house and publish books. This had been a dream of mine, growing from that day in Hagayot when Seugi had touched her words and wept.

"Talk goes by," I said, "and all the words and images in the net go by, and anybody can change them, but books are there. They last. They are the body of history, Mr. Yehedarhed says."

"Inspectors," said Dr. Yeron. "Until we get the free press amendment, the Chiefs aren't going to let anybody print anything they didn't dictate themselves."

I did not want to give up the idea. I knew that in Yotebber Region we could not publish anything political, but I argued that we might print stories and poems by women of the region. Others thought it a waste of time. We discussed it back and forth for a long time. Mr. Yehedarhed came back from a trip to the Embassy, up north in the Old Capital. He listened to our discussions, but said nothing, which disappointed me. I had thought that he might support my project.

One day I was walking home from school to my apartment, which was in a big, old, noisy house not far from the levee. I liked the place because my windows opened into the branches of trees, and through the trees I

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saw the river, four miles wide here, easing along among sand bars and reed beds and willow isles in the dry season, brimming up the levees in the wet season when the rainstorms scudded across it. That day as I came near the house, Mr. Yehedarhed appeared, with two sour-faced policewomen close behind him as usual. He greeted me and asked if we might talk. I was confused and did not know what to do but to invite him up to my room.

His guards waited in the lobby. I had just the one big room on the third floor. I sat on the bed and the Sub-Envoy sat in the chair. Owner went round and round his legs, saying roo? roo?

I had observed often that the Sub-Envoy took pleasure in disappointing the expectations of the Chief and his cohorts, who were all for pomp and fleets of cars and elaborate badges and uniforms. He and his policewomen went all over the city, all over Yotebber, in his government car or on foot. People liked him for it. They knew, as I knew now, that he had been assaulted and beaten and left for dead by a World Party gang his first day here, when he went out afoot alone. The city people liked his courage and the way he talked with everybody, anywhere. They had adopted him. We in the Liberation Movement thought of him as "our Envoy," but he was theirs, and the Chief's too. The Chief may have hated his popularity, but he profited from it.

"You want to start a publishing house," he said, stroking Owner, who fell over with his paws in the air.

"Dr. Yeron says there's no use until we get the Amendments."

"There's one press on Yeowe not directly controlled by the government," Mr. Yehedarhed said, stroking Owner's belly.

"Look out, he'll bite," I said. "Where is that?"

"At the University. I see," Mr. Yehedarhed said, looking at his thumb. I apologized. He asked me if I was certain that Owner was male. I said I had been told so, but never had thought to look. "My impression is that your Owner is a lady," Mr. Yehedarhed said, in such a way that I began to laugh helplessly.

He laughed along with me, sucked the blood off his thumb, and went on. "The University never amounted to much. It was a Corporation ploy—let the assets pretend they're going to college. During the last years of the War it was closed down. Since Liberation Day it's reopened and crawled along with no one taking much notice. The faculty are mostly old. They came back to it after the War. The National Government gives it a subsidy because it sounds well to have a University of Yeowe, but they don't pay it any attention, because it has no prestige. And because many of them are unenlightened men." He said this without scorn, descriptively. "It does have a printing house."

"I know," I said. I reached out for my old book and showed it to him.

He looked through it for a few minutes. His face was curiously tender as he did so. I could not help watching him. It was like watching a woman with a baby, a constant, changing play of attention and response.

"Full of propaganda and errors and hope," he said at last, and his voice

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too was tender. "Well, I think this could be improved upon. Don't you? All that's needed is an editor. And some authors."

"Inspectors," I warned, imitating Dr. Yeron.

"Academic freedom is an easy issue for the Ekumen to have some influence upon," he said, "because we invite people to attend the Ekumenical Schools on Hain and Ve. We certainly want to invite graduates of the University of Yeowe. But of course, if their education is severely defective because of the lack of books, of information. . . ."

I said, "Mr. Yehedarhed, are you *supposed* to subvert government policies?" The question broke out of me unawares.

He did not laugh. He paused for quite a long time before he answered. "I don't know," he said. "So far the Ambassador has backed me. We may both get reprimanded. Or fired. What I'd like to do . . ." His strange eyes were right on me again. He looked down at the book he still held. "What I'd like is to become a Yeowan citizen," he said. "But my usefulness to Yeowe, and to the Liberation Movement, is my position with the Ekumen. So I'll go on using that, or misusing it, till they tell me to stop."

When he left I had to think about what he had asked me to do. That was to go to the University as a teacher of history, and once there to volunteer for the editorship of the press. That all seemed so preposterous, for a woman of my background and my little learning, that I thought I must be misunderstanding him. When he convinced me that I had understood him, I thought he must have very badly misunderstood who I was and what I was capable of. After we had talked about that for a while, he left, evidently feeling that he was making me uncomfortable, and perhaps feeling uncomfortable himself, though in fact we laughed a good deal and I did not feel uncomfortable, only a little as if I were crazy.

I tried to think about what he had asked me to do, to step so far beyond myself. I found it difficult to think about. It was as if it hung over me, this huge choice I must make, this future I could not imagine. But what I thought about was him, Yehedarhed Havzhiva. I kept seeing him sitting there in my old chair, stooping down to stroke Owner. Sucking blood off his thumb. Laughing. Looking at me with his white-cornered eyes. I saw his red-brown face and red-brown hands, the color of pottery. His quiet voice was in my mind.

I picked up the kitten, half grown now, and looked at its hinder end. There was no sign of any male parts. The little black silky body squirmed in my hands. I thought of him saying, "Your Owner is a lady," and I wanted to laugh again, and to cry. I stroked the kitten and set her down, and she sat sedately beside me, washing her shoulder. "Oh poor little lady," I said. I don't know who I meant. The kitten, or Lady Tazeu, or myself.

He had said to take my time thinking about his proposal, all the time I wanted. But I had not really thought about it at all when, the next day but one, there he was, on foot, waiting for me as I came out of the school. "Would you like to walk on the levee?" he said.

I looked around.

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"There they are," he said, indicating his cold-eyed bodyguards. "Everywhere I am, they are, three to five meters away. Walking with me is dull, but safe. My virtue is guaranteed."

We walked down through the streets to the levee and up onto it in the long early evening light, warm and pink-gold, smelling of river and mud and reeds. The two women with guns walked along just about four meters behind us.

"If you do go to the University," he said after a long silence, "I'll be there constantly."

"I haven't yet—" I stammered.

"If you stay here, I'll be here constantly," he said. "That is, if it's all right with you."

I said nothing. He looked at me without turning his head. I said without intending to, "I like it that I can see where you're looking."

"I like it that I can't see where you're looking," he said, looking directly at me.

We walked on. A heron rose up out of a reed islet and its great wings beat over the water, away. We were walking south, downriver. All the western sky was full of light as the sun went down behind the city in smoke and haze.

"Rakam, I would like to know where you came from, what your life on Werel was," he said very softly.

I drew a long breath. "It's all gone," I said. "Past."

"We are our past. Though not only that. I want to know you. Forgive me. I want very much to know you."

After a while I said, "I want to tell you. But it's so bad. It's so ugly. Here, now, it's beautiful. I don't want to lose it."

"Whatever you tell me I will hold valuable," he said, in his quiet voice that went to my heart. So I told him what I could about Shomeke compound, and then hurried on through the rest of my story. Sometimes he asked a question. Mostly he listened. At some time in my telling he had taken my arm, I scarcely noticing at the time. When he let me go, thinking some movement I made meant I wanted to be released, I missed that light touch. His hand was cool. I could feel it on my forearm after it was gone.

"Mr. Yehedarhed," said a voice behind us: one of the bodyguards. The sun was down, the sky flushed with gold and red. "Better head back?"

"Yes," he said, "thanks." As we turned I took his arm. I felt him catch his breath.

I had not desired a man or a woman—this is the truth—since Shomeke. I had loved people, and I had touched them with love, but never with desire. My gate was locked.

Now it was open. Now I was so weak that at the touch of his hand I could scarcely walk on.

I said, "It's a good thing walking with you is so safe."

I hardly knew what I meant. I was thirty years old but I was like a young girl. I had never been that girl.

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He said nothing. We walked along in silence between the river and the city in a glory of failing light.

"Will you come home with me, Rakam?" he said.

Now I said nothing.

"They don't come in with us," he said, very low, in my ear, so that I felt his breath.

"Don't make me laugh!" I said, and began crying. I wept all the way back along the levee. I sobbed and thought the sobs were ceasing and then sobbed again. I cried for all my sorrows, all my shames. I cried because they were with me now and were me and always would be. I cried because the gate was open and I could go through at last, go into the country on the other side, but I was afraid to.

When we got into the car, up near my school, he took me in his arms and simply held me, silent. The two women in the front seat never looked round.

We went into his house, which I had seen once before, an old mansion of some owner of the Corporation days. He thanked the guards and shut the door. "Dinner," he said. "The cook's out. I meant to take you to a restaurant. I forgot." He led me to the kitchen, where we found cold rice and salad and wine. After we ate he looked at me across the kitchen table and looked down again. His hesitance made me hold still and say nothing. After a long time he said, "Oh, Rakam! will you let me make love to you?"

"I want to make love to you," I said. "I never did. I never made love to anyone."

He got up smiling and took my hand. We went upstairs together, passing what had been the entrance to the men's side of the house. "I live in the beza," he said, "in the harem. I live on the woman's side. I like the view."

We came to his room. There he stood still, looking at me, then looked away. I was so frightened, so bewildered, I thought I could not go to him or touch him. I made myself go to him. I raised my hand and touched his face, the scars by his eye and on his mouth, and put my arms around him. Then I could hold him to me, closer and closer.

Some time in that night as we lay drowsing entangled I said, "Did you sleep with Dr. Yeron?"

I felt Havzhiva laugh, a slow, soft laugh in his belly, which was against my belly. "No," he said. "No one on Yeowe but you. And you, no one on Yeowe but me. We were virgins, Yeowan virgins. . . . Rakam, *araha*. . . ." He rested his head in the hollow of my shoulder and said something else in a foreign language and fell asleep. He slept deeply, silently.

Later that year I came up north to the University, where I was taken on the faculty as a teacher of history. By their standards at that time, I was competent. I have worked there ever since, teaching and as editor of the press.

As he had said he would be, Havzhiva was there constantly, or almost.

The Amendments to the Constitution were voted, by secret ballot,

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mostly, in the Yeowan Year of Liberty 18. Of the events that led to this, and what has followed, you may read in the new three-volume *History of Yeowe* from the University Press. I have told the story I was asked to tell. I have closed it, as so many stories close, with a joining of two people. What is one man's and one woman's love and desire, against the history of two worlds, the great revolutions of our lifetimes, the hope, the unending cruelty of our species? A little thing. But a key is a little thing, next to the door it opens. If you lose the key, the door may never be unlocked. It is in our bodies that we lose or begin our freedom, in our bodies that we accept or end our slavery. So I wrote this book for my friend, with whom I have lived and will die free. ●

TROLL

Even frogs find the luck
Of a fulsome kiss to spark them
Into princehood.
Not he,
Gnarled and jaundiced-toothed,
Solitary, seeped in silt and sores.
He is cast to gnash, roar, fright,
To query love's fine melody
And rob from it, not kisses,
But his pound of flesh
To cross his covered way.
Blind to beauty,
Deaf to eros' song,
He only kneels to prey.

—Anne Devereaux Jordan

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ON BOOKS

Peter Heck

THE MILLENNIAL PROJECT:
Colonizing the Galaxy in Eight Easy Steps
by Marshall T. Savage
Little, Brown, $24.95hc/$16.95tpb

Every now and then a science fact book comes along that has all the galaxy-spanning scope and bright-eyed optimism of Golden Age science fiction. Arthur C. Clark's *Profiles of the Future* comes to mind, as does Shklovskii & Sagan's *Intelligent Life in the Universe*—two books that more than one SF writer went to for a quick dose of reality principle. Savage is every bit as optimistic as those predecessors (and in fact he got Clarke to contribute an appropriately awed introduction); his purpose, in so many words, is to lay down a workable blueprint for what the human race ought to do with its time and resources for the next thousand years.

Savage states his premise in the opening sentence of the first chapter: "It is our destiny to colonize space." At first glance, that looks like the kind of boundless humans-first chauvinism today's more sophisticated writers have outgrown; for one thing, it leaves entirely out of the account any possibility for running into natives, somewhere out among the stars, who have ideas of their own about whose galaxy it is. But Savage has thought out his position with some care. Habitable worlds are precious commodities to any space-going species, and our world is appealing enough that it would surely, by now, have attracted alien visitors if there were any to be attracted. (He considers, only to dismiss, the various woo-woo claims that we *have* had extraterrestrial visitors.) If Savage is correct in concluding not only that we will meet no advanced civilization out among the stars, but that Earth is in all probability the only planet in the galaxy to have produced intelligent life-forms, it follows that we have an obligation to preserve our planet's unique heritage of life by spreading it far beyond one fragile solar system.

For anyone with a long-range view, there are several problems with staying here on Earth. Population is the most obvious; even the most optimistic advocates of population control cannot promise that the growth of the human race will not continue unchecked, and there are only so many billions that the planet can support. Sooner or later, we come face to face with famine, plague, a madman with the Bomb, or one of the periodic meteor bombardments that planets are vulnerable to. As long as

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all our eggs are in one planetary basket, we are vulnerable to sudden extinction. The only long-range answer is to get a significant population off the planet.

Easy enough to say, but (as we all know) getting into space is far more difficult than the "backyard rocketship" dreams of an earlier generation made it appear. Current space technology is woefully inadequate to the task of getting any appreciable fraction of Earth's population off-planet. Nor, despite the rise of Newt Gingrich, do non-military space ventures appear at present to have any large constituency in the governments of the advanced nations. So how do we get from here to there?

Savage's answer is to start small, by developing the technology to colonize the largest unexploited area of our own planet: the surface of the oceans. There is every incentive to do so. The land area of our planet is barely a quarter of the available surface, and our population is already pushing against its limits. Successful colonization of the oceans would provide several generations of time for the technology for expansion into space to reach maturity. Moreover, the ocean colonies would not only provide living space, but food and energy for the masses still on land. The sale of these surplus resources would finance the construction of the necessary technology for the next step in Savage's plan, the move out into space.

Here is where Savage's project starts to move beyond the pipe dream stage. Not only does he have the vision of vast sea-going colonies, he has blueprints and specs for the hardware. The energy source for his colonies would be the 40 degrees Farenheit thermal differential between the warm surface waters and the cool ocean depths, converted to electricity. Even at very low levels of efficiency, this technology (applied sufficiently widely) can potentially produce five times the electrical power of all land-based sources —and from an undepletable resource, since the ultimate energy comes from the sun itself. As a bonus, the deep water is rich with nutrients, which can provide the raw material for algal growth, which can be harvested as food. (You may find spirulina algae already on the shelves of your local health food store.)

The colonization of the oceans provides the foundation for a first move into space, creating both the resources and the technological base. Savage rejects rocketry (which wastes much of its fuel in lifting more fuel to the point where it can be burned) as a grossly inefficient way of injecting a payload into orbit, although it has considerable value outside the steep gravity well of a planet. But if the oceans can in fact provide the quantities of power he suggests, we can safely predict the demise of the chemical-powered rocket as the primary vehicle for getting off Earth. Instead, Savage proposes superconducting mass drivers, built into equatorial mountain peaks, as the most efficient way of moving the resources for colonizing space into Earth orbit. With 100 percent efficiency, the energy required to place a kilogram in orbit by this technology would be un-

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der 9 kilowatt hours. Even after calculating the effects of gravity, air resistance, and other energy drains, Savage calculates that it should be possible to put a kilogram of mass into orbit for under a dollar's worth of power. Given a reliable and cheap way to get workers and materials into space, it is a small step to being able to construct permanent, self-supporting orbital habitats.

Once we have resources in orbit, the rest of the stairway to the stars follows easily enough. Lunar colonies can be built using methods not significantly different from those required for the space stations. Terraforming Mars is a bigger step, but a crucial one: it would be the first real conversion of an entire planet into a human habitation. Next comes colonization of the asteroids, possibly leading to the construction of a Dyson sphere around the sun, capturing the entire energy of a star for the human race's use. And so the human sphere of influence expands, eventually making its way beyond our solar system and filling the galaxy with human civilization—a civilization much transformed from our own primitive days, but still recognizably descended from Earth.

Summarized this baldly, Savage's "Millennial Project" sounds like a hopelessly naïve pie-in-the-sky scheme, perhaps suitable for adoption by a few retro hard SF novelists in search of material, but irrelevant to any actual future for the human race. And plenty of hard-nosed futurists would probably write it off as unworkable. But anyone who reads the book will find that Savage is always ready to talk hard facts and to present tables of figures and calculations. With over a hundred pages of appendices, notes, and bibliographic sources, he can present some concrete evidence for the workability of almost every step of his plan. And every step builds logically on the one before: the energy for the magnetic mass driver comes from the oceanic habitats; the technology for lunar habitats will be tested in Earth orbit; and so on right up to the expansion into interstellar space.

One could fault Savage for overconfidence; he invariably says "We *will,*" when the most charitable interpretation of existing technology will barely support "We *could,* if everything works out the way I plan." His relentless optimism will grate on many readers' nerves. On the other hand, given the choice between the boundless human empire he projects and some of the dystopian visions of current science fiction, I know which future I would choose to live in. The question remains: is Savage's vision (or some reasonable variant of it) attainable, and if so, can we channel our resources so as to make it come to pass? Anyone whose vision of the human future extends past next week's paycheck should be asking themselves precisely these questions; and if the answer to the first one is "Yes," it would be hard to justify not attempting to make it so. SF writers looking for believable future scenarios will find plenty of material to exploit here. But more importantly, readers who are serious about the future should make it a point to get their hands on a copy of *The Millennial*

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Project, and to think hard about its implications.

HEAVY WEATHER

by Bruce Sterling
Bantam Spectra, $21.95

Sterling's new novel is set in one of those futures—less than four decades from today—in which all the worst nightmares of environmental collapse are cranked up full blast. A runaway greenhouse effect has produced extreme drought conditions and turned much of the area along the U.S.-Mexican border a near-desert. At the same time, the predominant weather patterns now favor the formation of gigantic tornadoes, slashing across the newly created badlands of the Southwest with unprecedented fury.

The novel introduces us to the Storm Troupe, a band of outlaw meteorologists who make it their business to track the giant storms, using a whole array of high-tech equipment, from virtual reality gear and military-surplus "smart" vehicles to bubble wrap and paper clothing. Their holy grail is the "F-6": a tornado an order of magnitude more violent than the worst ever recorded. Dr. Jerry Mulcahey, the renegade mathematician who founded the Troupe, believes that an F-6 is not only possible, but that it may even turn into a permanent feature of Earth's atmosphere, much like the Great Red Spot in Jupiter's atmosphere. If so, it might well make the entire planet uninhabitable.

We see Sterling's future world mainly through two sets of eyes: those of Alex Unger, a lung-damaged rebel whose rejection of authority is a threat to everyone around him, and his sister Jane, one of the most dedicated members of the Troupe. The book begins in an illegal Mexican hospital ward, where Alex is about to undergo a lung enema, designed to counteract the results of years of polluted air and allergens. Jane tracks him down and kidnaps him just as he is recovering from the painful procedure, taking him across the border into Texas where the Troupe is getting ready for a new tornado season. Here, despite his physical weakness and poor adaptation to any sort of discipline, he becomes a member of the Troupe, after an initiation that sends him on a stomach-turning stunt flight on a computer-controlled ultralight aircraft.

The scientific foundation of the story, the meteorology of tornadoes, is fascinating to anyone who has ever sat outside during a heavy thunderstorm (although I can't speak for those who have seen a real twister at close range). The sociological parallel to the climatic degradation is equally frightening: the ecological disaster has brought about a state of near-anarchy, in which there is a black market for anything you can name, and in which the local authorities are more likely to be a vigilante band than anything resembling an elected government.

In this on-the-edge environment, the most reliable currency is know-how. The most common question, after "Who are you?" is "What do you hack?"—or, in the jargon of an earlier era, "What are you into?" The answers, in the Troupe, run the gamut from Comanche history

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to computer-driven "smart rope" (Alex's chosen field). It is know-how that allows the Troupe to follow the storms, to survive in the desert, to cut deals with the locals and the remnants of government for the things they need. So far, they look like ultimate scavengers, living by their wits on the edge of a decaying technological society.

But as the plot progresses, a new set of tensions builds up in parallel with the anticipated arrival of the F-6. A group of vigilantes calling themselves Texas Rangers starts harassing the Troupe; at the same time, Alex learns that Mulcahey's brother, a powerful political figure, is taking an interest in their doings, after long years of neglect. It is clear that something more is at stake than just the possible arrival of a super-storm. At the same time, Alex's lungs begin to regress. He tries to jury-rig another lung enema, but in the primitive field conditions in which the Troupe lives, he cannot properly perform the operation.

Then, right on schedule, the F-6 hits, sowing destruction over the entire state of Texas. The Troupe is pushed to the limits of its resources, and Alex and Jane find themselves cut off from help. And at this point, a whole new dimension of the plot emerges—a previously unsuspected massive conspiracy that arises convincingly from the political undertones of the earlier chapters. Sterling manages to surprise the reader, and at the same time to make the surprises seem inevitable, with the F-6 raging in counterpoint to the political drama. And then, in an ironic epilogue, we visit the surviving characters a few years later, and learn that they have quietly capitulated to the forces that ultimately turn all rebels into establishment figures.

Sterling's accomplishment in this book is not so much his creation of the burnt-out Southwest, or of the larger collapse of American society, or of the quirky scavengers of the Troupe—most of that is stock SF material, done again and again since the mid-60s. (J.G. Ballard's early novels come to mind.) Nor does Sterling's plot drag the reader along by main force, although his vision of environmental apocalypse is intense enough in its own right to keep the reader turning pages. What finally makes the book a satisfying experience is his ability to pull not one, but two surprises out of the long-built-up arrival of the F-6; not just simple plot twists, but convincing consequences of his premises. And, at the end, he manages to forge a vision of a liveable world out of the ashes of a destroyed society. "Life goes on" may not be the most inspiring of messages, but after a wild ride through the heart of the whirlwind, just that reassurance may be all the reward any reader could wish for.

THE SECRET OCEANS
by Betty Ballantine
Bantam, $29.95

Betty Ballantine, one-half of the most influential couple in modern publishing, makes her debut as an author with this lavishly illustrated story of a deep-sea expedition in an advanced submersible, aimed at readers "from 8 to 80." Twelve artists took part in the

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project; since their contribution is by any realistic assessment as important as the author's, their names should be mentioned in any review. They are: Lloyd Birmingham, Steve Brennan, Joseph de Vito, David Henderson, Carol Inouye, Robert Larken, Gilles Malkine, Jeffrey Mangiat, Thomas McNeely, Davis Meltzer, Charles Passarelli, and Jeffrey Terreson. And the illustrations, it should be said at once, are marvelous, giving both the undersea world and the characters remarkable richness.

The plot of *The Secret Oceans* is easily summarized: an expedition sets out in an experimental undersea vehicle, the *Turtle,* to study the communications of whales and dolphins, with an international crew of "aquanauts," including two teenaged geniuses: Paul, a brilliant musician and linguist, and Donna, a specialist in computers and electronics. Practically at the outset of their voyage, they are captured by representatives of a highly intelligent species of dolphins, to which they give the name *cetasapien.* The aquanauts and the dolphins (who are individually recognizable by distinctive frills on their heads) quickly learn to communicate with one another, and come to an understanding about the need to cooperate. The humans agree to accompany the cetasapiens on a globe-spanning journey to observe life under the seas, which makes up the bulk of the plot of the book.

In one important sense, this book is a direct descendent of the kind of science fiction one associates with Jules Verne: it is essentially the story of a fabulous voyage, in which the reader is introduced to a wide variety of natural wonders. (Of course, any science fictional submarine voyage is almost inevitably bound to remind readers of Verne's *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea.)* And, as in Verne, the proliferation of wonders is the real focus of the book; the plot is largely episodic, without a great deal of forward momentum and only a few moments of real suspense. That said, it should also be noted that the wonders of the undersea world are in themselves more than sufficient to keep most readers turning pages—especially in view of the gorgeous illustrations.

The artists' work (individually credited following the text) ranges from closeups of small fish to panoramic views of whole schools of marine animals, or undersea landscapes. Not surprisingly, the artists have given a strong rendering of the variety and visual beauty of life in the seas. The character portraits are good, as well, giving each of the half-dozen crew members an individual personality.

The voyage takes the *Turtle* from the arctic seas to the Amazon, to the Australian Barrier Reef and into the depths of the Mariana Trench. At every point, there is life in the sea: great pods of whales, primitive-looking Amazon dolphins, the bizarre luminescent fish of the extreme depths, and the strange worms that huddle close to thermal vents on the ocean bottom. The cetasapiens are especially concerned with the balance of life in the ocean; when the *Turtle* stuns several large sharks to prevent them from attacking a newborn whale calf, several of the cetasa-

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piens keep the sharks moving until they recover their ability to swim, thus saving them from drowning. In all this, Ballantine's ecological concern comes through clearly, without ever seeming forced or preachy. There is no dumbing down of the subject, no fudging the tougher issues raised by the text.

The Secret Oceans is the kind of science fiction one can easily see reaching a very wide audience. (Of course, Betty Ballantine is quite aware of ways to draw in as many readers as possible.) Its near-future setting and its accessibility to younger readers are likely to be assets in getting it into lots of homes where the adults pick it up and find themselves turning pages, drawn in by the artwork. A bibliography offers readers the chance to explore further. Recommended —especially to those who have young readers to share it with.

BRIDE OF THE RAT GOD

by Barbara Hambly
Del Rey, $5.99

This tongue-in-cheek historical fantasy takes us to Hollywood in 1923, when the silent movie era was at its peak. Chrysanda Flamande is a star who typifies the extravagance of the Roaring '20s, in a constant round of wild parties and wilder love affairs, spiced with plenty of bathtub gin and cocaine. At the premier of her latest epic, she is accosted by an elderly Chinese man, who mutters dire warnings of "a matter of life and death" before security hauls him away. Chrysanda, unimpressed, dashes off to still another party, leaving her sister-in-law Norah Blackstone to find her own way home.

Norah, through whose eyes we see the events of the plot, is a sensible Englishwoman who has spent the last few years in near-poverty, a World War I widow, and a dramatic contrast to Chrysanda in almost every way. Stuck with riding herd on Chrysanda's three spoiled Pekes, she accepts an offer of a cup of tea and a ride home from a young cinematographer, Alex Mindelbaum. The two of them talk briefly with Chrysanda's costar, Charlie Sandringham, an alcoholic veteran of the legitimate theater, who is clearly smitten with a handsome young stuntman. The next morning, they learn that the stuntman has been murdered—"cut to pieces," as the police put it—and Sandringham is the suspect. And thus begins a wonderfully atmospheric period piece.

Shang Ko, the elderly Chinese man who appeared in the first scene, returns to reveal that Chrysanda, by wearing an antique Chinese necklace given to her by her producer, has become the intended bride of Da Shu Ken, the Mongolian Rat God. The stuntman, who had taken her place for a scene in her latest movie, drew the initial attack of the Rat God, whose hunger was only partly sated by the blood of that victim. Now Da Shu Ken intends to claim his original victim—and for the safety of the whole world, he must be stopped.

Hambly builds the novel around one of the most generic of fantasy plots, one that works equally well played straight or as pure camp. Hambly takes a more difficult tack, attempting to play it both ways —and she manages, for the most part, to make it work both ways.

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The key trick is to lampoon Chrysanda and her coterie of Hollywood airheads at every opportunity, while keeping the edge of danger always just visible beneath the surface. Norah and Alex, along with Shang Ko, carry most of the serious plot, while Chrysanda is frittering away her time with mah-jongg or pampering the Pekes. But Hambly is adept at keeping the reader off-balance. Just as you're convinced that some detail of the plot is just another silly bit of Hollywood business, it is likely to jump up and bite somebody.

For example, there is a cult of white-robed "priestesses" just up the hill from Chrysanda's house: pure West Coast woo-woo the first couple of times they appear. Then one of them shows up with a knife . . . or there is the clumsy, self-important cowboy star who plays opposite Chrysanda in her latest film, a biblical epic; a pure figure of fun who suddenly turns sinister . . . or there is the transformation of the Pekes into something far removed from their image as lap dogs. . . . Hambly does this enough times to let the reader know that nothing in the book is to be taken entirely for granted. As a result, every detail takes on a tension just below the surface because of the reader's awareness that it might suddenly reveal hidden dimensions.

Partly because the potential for surprise makes the reader scrutinize every detail all the more closely, the period setting takes on a special prominence. On the whole, this setting is very nicely realized; the early '20s are a fascinating era, especially in Hollywood. Hambly has done her research well, integrating actual bits of local history into the plot. I spotted one or two anachronisms in her use of music; at one point, Alex plays a record by Duke Ellington, whose band did not record until 1925. But small lapses like this are inevitable in historical fiction, and Hambly gets the important things right.

Bride of the Rat God is a very entertaining book, with a fine blend of comedy and tension, an appealing heroine in Norah, and excellent use of atmosphere and setting. It works equally well as popcorn fantasy and as an object lesson in how to do a historical without sounding like a textbook. Best of all, it reads as if the author had a lot of fun writing it, and most readers are likely to have just as much fun reading it.

MISCELLANEOUS WRITINGS

by H.P. Lovecraft (edited by S.T. Joshi)
Arkham House, $29.95

This fourth volume of the "Arkham Lovecraft" presents a wide range of work, almost none of it previously available to anyone except the most avid of collectors. Lovecraft's minor works—it would be hard to argue that *anything* in this book is of major status—include pieces on travel, politics, literary criticism, philosophy, autobiography, humorous sketches, and even a few dollops of fiction. Joshi has dug up everything from outright juvenilia (one piece written at seven years old) to a letter written practically on Lovecraft's deathbed; from very rough early drafts to carefully polished work intended for publication. With the exception of his let-

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ters, this may be the most complete self-portrait of Lovecraft to see print. Yet of all the volumes of Lovecraft's writings this is the one that the reader of Lovecraft's fiction can mostly do without.

It may seem odd to say that of a collection of essentially new material by a writer as important as Lovecraft. But Lovecraft is an odd specimen, however one looks at him. Much of his curious power seems to arise from an incongruous mixture of qualities in his own person, balancing frank materialism against hidebound conservatism, and a wide curiosity against an almost pathological fear of the unfamiliar. There are few writers so widely admired, so widely influential in their field, and yet so drastically limited. At his best —quintessentially, in the sixteen tales collected in Arkham House's *The Dunwich Horror and Others*—he is one of the masters of genre fiction. And while it is typically described as horror, the essence of his work is at heart science fictional; his mature fiction accepts the universe uncovered by modern science, and his monsters are for the most part given pseudo-scientific justifications in the best SF tradition. Lovecraft's fiction is an audacious leap beyond the hackneyed horrors of the old world—ghosts, witches, vampires, the little people—into a world where all things are possible, and some of them are more frightening than anyone had ever before imagined. It is powerful stuff, as any reader who came under its spell at an impressionable age will surely testify—even those who at a later age tried to reread it and found all the magic gone.

Miscellaneous Writings offers some hints of Lovecraft's power, especially in the book's first two sections: "Dreams and Fancies," and "The Weird Fantasist." There's an early draft of "The Shadow Over Innsmouth"—found on the backs of the pages of the final draft of the story. The draft, while much more compressed than the published version, could probably have been published in its own right, were the complete version available (several pages are missing). "Nyarlathotep" (one of Lovecraft's great gifts is the creation of names that recall Charlie Parker's comment on his song title, "Klacktoveedsedtene"—"Who cares what it means, it's just a great *sound!*") pits an invented Egyptian deity against a modern city, with atmospheric results. The "History of the Necronomicon" has the characteristic Lovecraft touch: superficially convincing bogus scholarship, bizarre invention, and pleasantly baroque prose, all in the space of two pages. Especially interesting is the "Commonplace Book," in which Lovecraft jotted down ideas for stories, some of which turned into finished pieces (including "The Call of Cthulhu").

Lovecraft's critical observations are also of interest, especially those on writers congenial to his own temperament. His eulogy on Robert E. Howard probably tells more about Lovecraft than about the creater of Conan, but his comments on Lord Dunsany could serve as an introduction to a collection of Dunsany's writings, and his "Notes on Writing Weird Fiction" offer a broad insight into his goals and methods. Of less immediate

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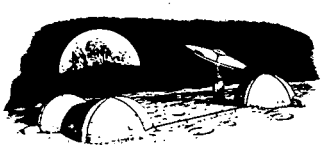
interest are his observations of non-fantastic writers. More than one reader may agree with his acerbic comments on free verse, or on T.S. Eliot's poetry, but Lovecraft's opinions, while colorfully expressed, betray a general prejudice against almost all poetic experimentation, sufficient to disqualify him as a commentator. (Lovecraft might, in fact, have had more in common with Pound and Eliot than he ever realized.) Again, the reader will learn more about Lovecraft himself than about his ostensible subject. That is not entirely a bad thing, but the reader should recognize that Lovecraft is clearly giving a minority report on these areas of modern literature.

Lovecraft spent a great deal of his time writing for APAS—amateur newsletters bound and circulated among the contributors—and a fair amount of that output is also printed here. A lot of it is so bound up in personalities and issues of concern only to the other amateur authors involved that the modern reader will wonder why it was worth preserving. But, as one of the largest portions of Lovecraft's literary output, it certainly belongs here—if only for the edification of the scholar.

Lovecraft's travel writings, intended primarily for his close friends, may be the most difficult to assimilate for many modern readers. While there is a certain historical interest in his descriptions of the United States of seventy years ago, his pseudo-Augustan prose and attitude have lost whatever power to amuse that they may have had for his circle of friends, and often obscure what he is trying to convey. And in these essays, more than anywhere else, his racist and anti-semitic views are openly expressed. While it would be dishonest for Joshi to pretend that Lovecraft had never written such venomous lines as "oily Jews fat with ill-got money," there can be very few of Lovecraft's modern admirers who can read them with anything but discomfort and disgust.

All in all, *Miscellaneous Writings* is a decidedly mixed bag. Lovecraft completists will of course want every word, and any serious library collection should have this on its shelves. Those interested in seeing what lay behind the stiff New England front that Lovecraft habitually showed the world will find a good bit to intrigue them here—and a few things the author's friends might wish had been left in obscurity. But the vast majority of readers, those interested in Lovecraft almost entirely as the author of the hair-raising stories of the Cthulhu mythos, will find only a few pieces worth their time and effort. ●



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Paul Di Filippo makes his *Asimov's* fiction debut by going for a wild, gonzo romp through time and space, in the madcap "Take Me To the Pilot"; **Candyce Byrne** makes a powerful *Asimov's* debut with the bizarre and yet poignant story of "The Death of Beatrix Potter"; and **Wil McCarthy** returns with the saga of a man who refuses to let a dream die, no matter what the odds against it, in the ingenious "Rocket Ghosts."

FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column warns us that "The Millennium Is Almost Here." **Norman Spinrad's** "On Books" column examines "Things of the Spirit." Plus an array of other features. Look for our August issue on sale on your newsstands on June 20, 1995.

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The big Memorial Day con(vention) weekend is upon us. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on clubs and fanzines, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 101 S. Whiting #700A, Alexandria VA 22304. The hot line is (703) 461-8645. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons as Filthy Pierre with a music keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss.

MAY 1995

26-29—**CostumeCon.** For info, write: **Box 784, Adelaide St. P. O., Toronto ON M5C 2K1.** Or phone: **(416) 699-8479** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). Con will be held in: Scarborough ON (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Sheraton. Guests will include: none announced. Costuming.

26-28—**WisCon. (608) 256-4603.** Concourse Hotel, Madison WI. Hambly, McCrumb. Feminism & SF.

26-28—**ConQuest. (913) 649-8733.** Park Place, Kansas City. O. Butler, D. Anderson, Mike Resnick.

26-28—**MisCon. (406) 721-1388.** 4B's Inn South, Missoula MT. Niven, S. Jackson, Dalmas, Foglios.

26-28—**Famous Monsters Magazine Con. (818) 764-9400.** Los Angeles CA. Ackerman. Fantasy films.

26-29—**LepreCon. (602) 945-6809.** Francisco Grande Hotel, Casa Grande AZ. Strowger. Art focus.

26-29—**DisClave. (703) 461-8645.** Renaissance, Washington DC. C. Sheffield, Eggleton, Bischoff.

26-29—**MediaWestCon. (517) 372-0738.** Lansing MI. No guests. Focus on Trek and other fandoms.

27—**Yellow Brick Road Festival. (316) 725-5797.** Sedan KS. A Munchkin from "Wizard of Oz" film.

27-28—**Sol III.** Norbeck Castle Hotel, Blackpool UK. Media SF & fantasy. Spring Bank Holiday.

JUNE 1995

2-4—**DucKon. (708) 665-4099.** Hyatt, Lisle IL. J. Nye, Proni, S. Van Camp, Defenbaugh, Moebius.

9-11—**ConCertino, % Kranzner, 18 Riverside, Allston MA 02134. (617) 254-0057.** Eastern MA. Music.

9-12—**Australia Nat'l. Con, Box 580D, Melbourne 3001, Australia.** Hobart, Tasmania, K.S. Robinson.

10-11—**VulCon, Box 1701, Vulcan AB TOL 2BO.** City-run Trek event. "Spock Days" parade, etc.

10-17—**SeaTrek, 8306 Mills Dr., Box 198, Miami FL 33183. (800) 326-8735.** Cruise with Trek stars.

16-18—**Ad Astra, Box 7276, Stn. A, Toronto ON M5W 1X9. (416) 454-5499.** Holiday Inn, Yorkdale ON.

16-18—**Ozmopolitan, Box 95, Kinderhook IL 62345.** Rosemont (Chicago) IL. For Wizard of Oz fans.

17-20—**ABA, 828 S. Broadway, Tarrytown NY 10591. (800) 637-0037.** Chicago IL. Book trade show.

JULY 1995

13-16—**DragonCon, Box 47696, Atlanta GA 30362. (404) 925-2813.** Hilton, Atlanta GA. NASFiC. $60.

AUGUST 1995

24-28—**WorldCon, Box 15430, Washington DC 20003. (301) 345-5186.** Moat House Hotel, Glasgow UK.

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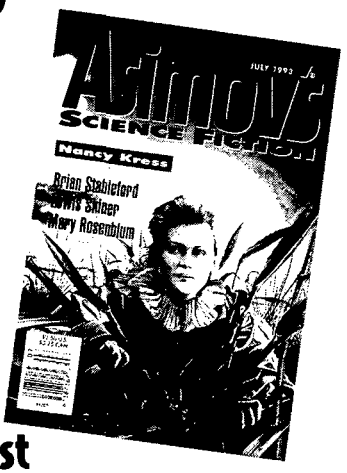

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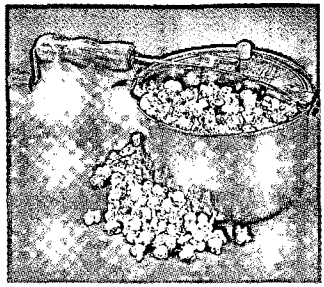

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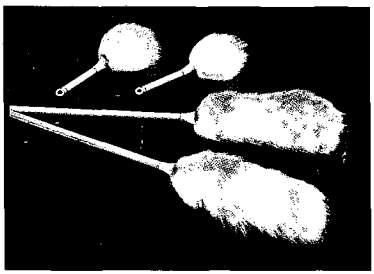

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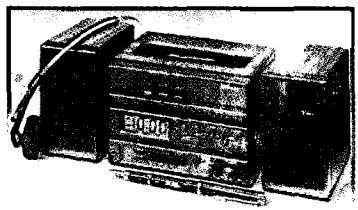

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